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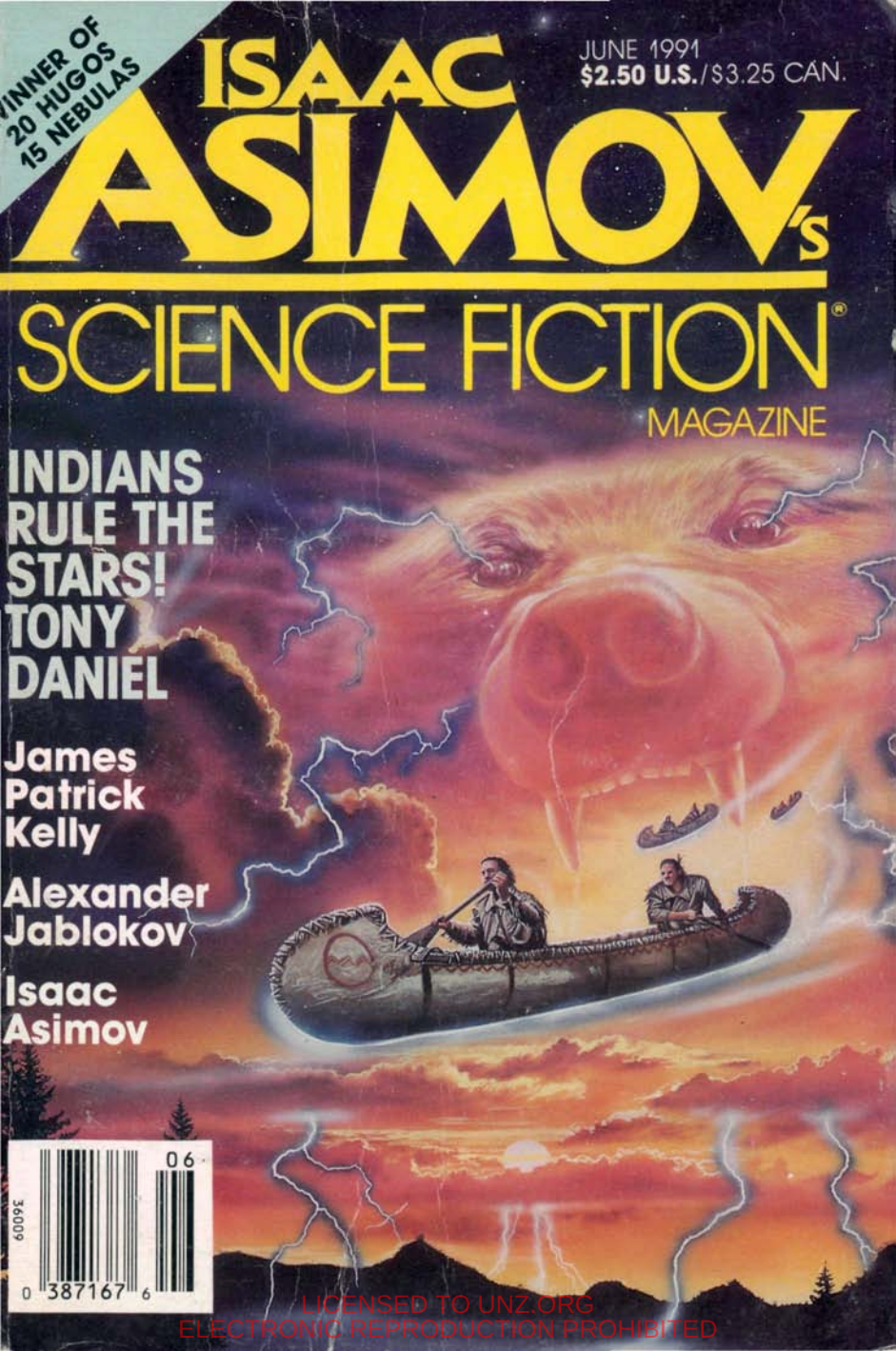
Isaac Asimov



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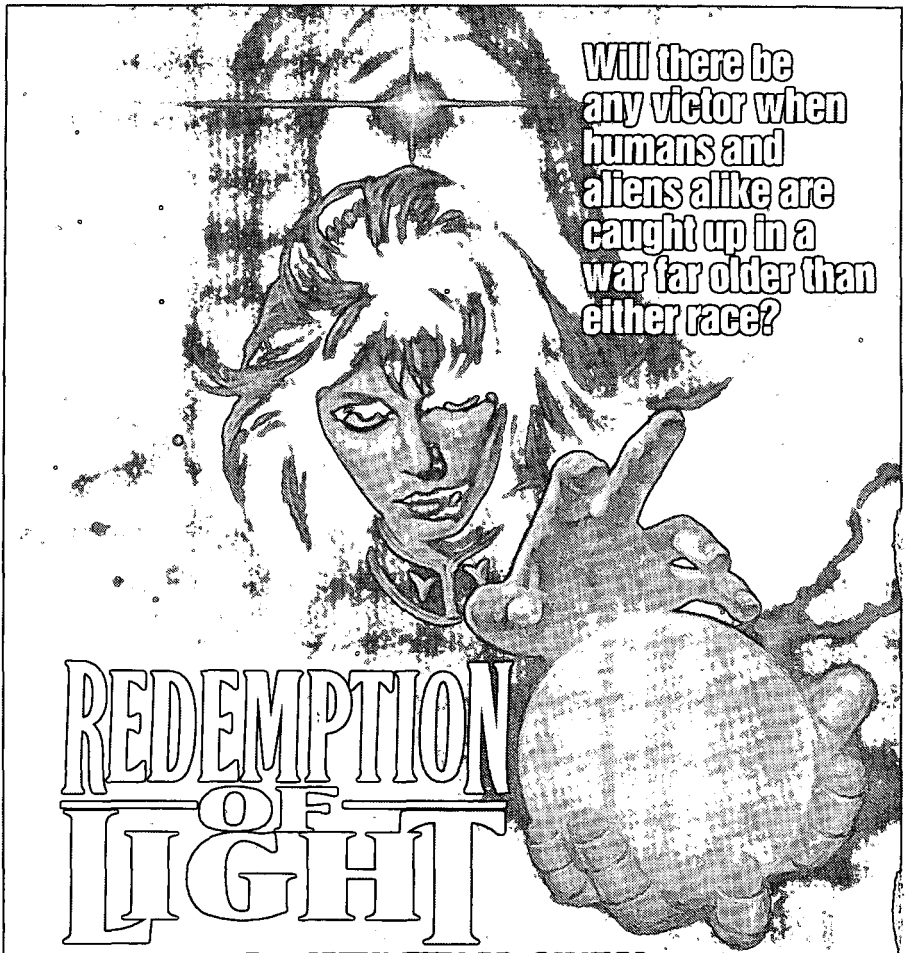
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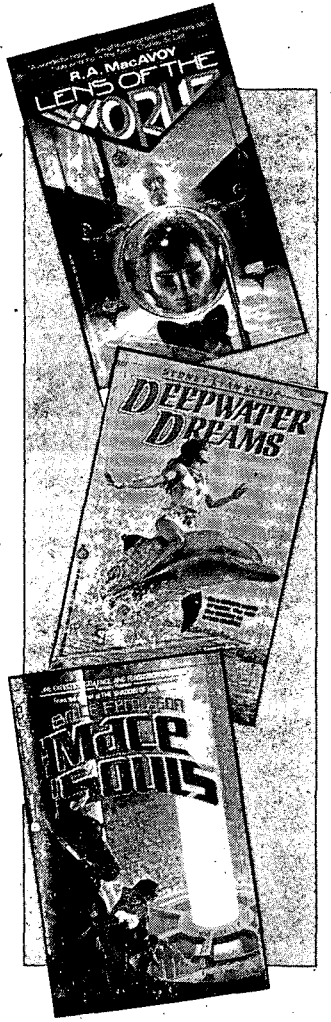


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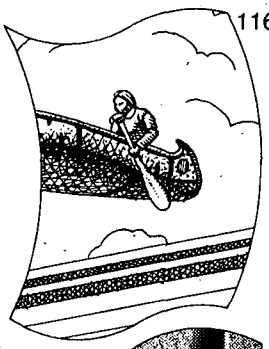


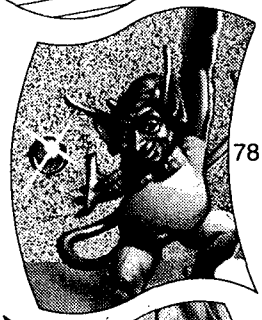


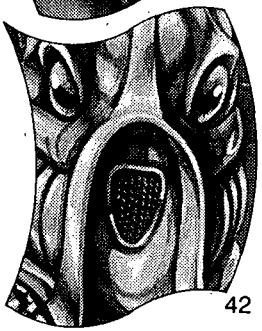


Stories from *IAsfm* have won fourteen Hugos and fifteen Nebula awards, and our editors have received six Hugo awards for Best Editor. *IAsfm* was also the 1990 recipient of the *Locus* Award for Best Magazine.


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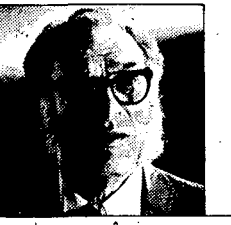
# EDITORIAL



by Isaac Asimov

## UNTOUCHABLE

I am a Gilbert & Sullivan buff, an honest one, for a couple of years ago Doubleday published a huge volume entitled *Asimov's Annotated Gilbert & Sullivan*. I am particularly fascinated by William S. Gilbert's adeptness at rhyme and every once in a while I try to imitate him. I have written (and published) a couple of parodies of Gilbertian verse, and on one occasion, at least, I managed a completely independent poem in which I deliberately used only one rhyme word, as Gilbert sometimes did.

I made it up one night when I couldn't sleep. It was inspired by Dorothy Parker's poem in which she laments a lover who, in appreciation, gave her one perfect rose when what she wanted was one perfect Cadillac. Since I couldn't remember Parker's poem, I made up my own and every line ends with a rhyme for "rose."

I like to have my comic verse fit a tune and since I utterly lack all ability to make one up, I try to pick one that is good, that is familiar, and that is in the public domain. In this case, the first line I thought of just happened to fit the tune of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" and that was good enough for me. I have often sung my parody but I have never published it and so here it is for the first time:

THE BATTLE HYMN
OF THE
GIRLFRIEND

by Isaac Asimov

When my lover wants to tell me I
look great without my clothes,
As I lie upon the sofa in a soft,
erotic pose,
He races to the florist; that's precisely where he goes;
To buy one perfect rose.

*Chorus*:
Glory, glory hallelujah
Glory, glory hallelujah
Glory, glory hallelujah
To buy one perfect rose.

I should be much more grateful for
the present, I suppose,
But I'd rather drip with ermine
from my head down to my toes,
Or feel the grand security an emerald bestows,
Than have a perfect rose.

* * *



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I would like to have a bank account
that grows and grows and grows,
I would like to watch my assets as
they steadily unfroze,
All I ask is something more substantial, Heaven knows,
Than a stupid perfect rose.

I tell him this whenever he's in his orgastic throes,
I whisper it in poetry, I shout it out in prose,
Then through the door he runs as his erotic frenzy glows,
To buy another perfect rose.

I think that I will kill him when he drops into a doze,
I'll strangle him tomorrow with a pair of pantyhose.
Then on his coffin I will place the symbol that he chose,
His goddam perfect rose.

(The chorus is repeated after every verse, of course, with the last line altered to match the last line of the verse.)

On June 29, 1990, I gave a talk on Gilbert & Sullivan at the Mohonk Mountain House. It was a good talk and I found it great fun but I carefully crafted it so that as the hour came to an end I just had time to tell them about my attempt to do some Gilbertian rhyming and to sing "The Battle Hymn" to this group of pleasant, middle-class, rather elderly people. I had set them up for it, you see, with the utmost care and it exploded like a bomb. They *loved* it and flocked around me afterward, not talking

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about Gilbert & Sullivan at all, but only about "The Battle Hymn," and how much they enjoyed it.

All except one nice lady, who was aggrieved. "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," she said, had a great deal of reverent meaning to the American people and I should not, she said, have satirized it. I did not argue with her; merely said, as gently as I could, that I was sorry I had offended her, but that I thought it was just good-natured fun without evil intent.

I doubt that she was satisfied, but I feel I must discuss the matter here, for it goes to the very heart of the growing lust in our nation to censor, and thus to vitiate our great two-century tradition of freedom of speech. In this magazine, (in which, of course, freedom of speech is of the essence) we must fight this tendency with all our hearts and minds.

First, about my parody. I did not touch Julia Ward Howe's words; I appropriated only the tune. The tune is not Howe's. She heard soldiers of the Grand Army of the Republic singing "John Brown's Body" and she adopted the tune for her own poem, which she wrote in 1862.

"John Brown's Body" was written by Thomas Brigham Bishop in 1859 after John Brown had been executed for attempting to lead a slave insurrection. However, Bishop only wrote the words. Again the tune was appropriated from an earlier hymn, which included "Glory, glory, hallelujah," and which derived its tune from who knows where. So you see, in using the tune, I'm just using a well-worn set of notes of no particular significance.

That's not the point, of course. It can easily be argued that because of what Howe did, the tune, which may have been of no importance to begin with, has *now* become associated with "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," a great monument to the cause of freedom.

Well, maybe so, but does that make it sacrosanct? Does that make it untouchable? Does that mean that someone who disagrees with the sentiments of Howe's poem must keep that disagreement secret?

Look, the whole point about freedom of speech is that it protects the unpopular statement. Popular statements don't need protection. There never was a despotism in the world that was so deep and so bad and so cruel that it interfered with people who praised it. It was perfectly permissible to say "Heil, Hitler" in Nazi Germany and to do it as often as you wanted to. It was perfectly permissible to praise Stalin in the Soviet Union of 1950 and to praise the Ayatollah in the Iran of 1980.

What was not permitted and what was deadly dangerous, was to say out loud or even to hint that you thought Hitler, Stalin, or the Ayatollah were wicked, or even just a little bit wrong.

So when we talk about freedom of speech in America, we're talking



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specifically and categorically about the right to say nasty things about the president of the United States if one thinks he deserves them, or to say nasty or even offensive things about any institution in the United States, however revered. If freedom of speech doesn't mean that, then it doesn't mean anything.

Naturally, we must draw the line at human safety. It is well established that freedom of speech does *not* mean that one has the right to raise a false cry of fire in a crowded assemblage. It also does *not* mean the right to urge on a lynch mob.

No right is absolute.

But I'll tell you what was frightening. It was President Bush's utter willingness to seize a popular issue of thoughtless people who think in slogans, and to offer to alter and limit the Bill of Rights in order to be able to put people in jail for burning the flag.

I don't want the flag burned. I don't think it makes any sense to burn the flag for any reason. Just the same, I'd sooner see a thousand flags go up in flames before watching the Bill of Rights burn. The flag is a symbol that stands not for our nation, but for the *values* of our nation, among which one of the most precious is the freedom of speech, of *unpopular* speech. If that freedom and others like it vanish, then the flag is a symbol of nothing much and it doesn't matter if it is burned.

Senator Dole pointed out that it was just twenty words; that it was just protecting the flag. Senator Dole has apparently never heard of the thin edge of the wedge. However innocuous it may seem just to criminalize the burning of the flag, it sets the precedent.

Do you think the flag is the only thing revered in the United States? What about the Bible? What about a crucifix? What about a menorah? What about Santa Claus? What about John Wayne?

Am I being ridiculous? If I am, tell me where it stops. I get offended to the extreme when some airhead says something nasty about science fiction.

Shall we amend the Constitution to save my feelings? And shall I go to jail for using a particular tune for a bit of fun?

I know where it starts. It starts with Bush wrapping himself in the flag to win re-election. But where does it end? Tell me that. ●

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# LETTERS

Dear Dr. Asimov,

I read Michael Simmons' letter in the August issue of *IAsfm* and would simply like to respond to it. In it he challenges SF writers to write stories with a Christian theme without misinterpreting "Christian doctrine." What Christian doctrine? Roman Catholic? Baptist? There are so many shades of Christianity that many different interpretations of doctrine would come up. For many, Christianity is not a matter of religion but of philosophy—a way of dealing with life and society. No single person's religious/philosophical convictions can be categorized as Christian, Buddhist, Materialist, and so on. Categorizing is a difficult thing —especially when it comes to religion. It should not be expected that everyone will have the same categories.

I do not disagree that good science fiction stories built around a Christian theme would be a good thing. I only warn that there is no way they could be fit into one universal Christian doctrine—there is no such thing. There are as many interpretations of Christianity as there are people who call themselves Christian.

Sincerely,

Tudor I. Lewis
Omaha, NB

*There was a time when every nation, every group, even every household had its own tutelary gods. In those days, people accepted other religions the way we accept other cuisines. In a place like New York, you can (and do) indulge in dozens of different national cookeries with great delight and pleasure. But then someone invented monotheism in which there was only* one *God and he was the private property of one group and everyone else was evil, wrong, and demonic. That's like saying that only steak and potatoes are nourishing and that anyone who eats lamb chops and egg foo young should be burned at the stake.*

*—Isaac Asimov*

Dear Dr. Asimov,

I don't know if your magazine publishes thank you letters or not, but I am giving it a try. Because your magazine ran my March 1990 letter which contained a question about a certain science fiction book I had read in 1967, I received many, many letters and phone calls saying that it is most likely *Earth Abides* written by George R. Stewart, and published in 1949. I have received so many letters, not only from all over the US, but also from Czechoslovakia, Holland, and the



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Yukon (and I know where they all are, and can even point them out on a map) telling me what book it might have been that I have been unable to answer all of them.

If you do run "thank you" letters of any kind in *IAsfm*, please run this one as you, personally, will have done me a great service.

I did not realize there were so many woman science fiction fans out there. At least 50 percent of the responses to my question to you were from women! Way to go! And who says that women do not have scientific, or science fiction, minds. Sincerely,

James L. Puckett
4893 North Lariat Dr.
Castle Rock, CO 80104

*Someone once quoted a remark I had made, which I knew I had made, but could not remember where I had made it. I offered the first reader who located it for me five dollars and I was promptly greeted by a deluge. The first person did get five dollars, but I had to write many letters of thanks after it. That's one reason the human species has advanced. Very few of us know much, but everyone of us knows something that others don't.*

*—Isaac Asimov*

Dear Doctor Asimov:

I suppose one could say I am an addicted letter writer, but rarely to people I don't know (apart from the odd "To the Editor" when I'm particularly irate about something).

Your editorial on English touched a chord, however, as I too love the English language. Although I have a touch of the arrogance inherited from my forebears, when the sun never set . . . etc., I am not too proud to learn and to thank my teacher. So, thank you for informing about the double root of the language I just absorbed with my mother's milk.

It had always puzzled me that English is so versatile, capable of being very succinct and sometimes almost incomprehensibly flowery. Now I know why. Having lived and worked in French Canada, I was sometimes involved in producing advertising material and the sheer logistics of trying to cram artwork and text into the same space, one side English, the reverse French, were mindboggling. Had I known of the Latinate version of English, perhaps I and my French colleague might have avoided some hot, bilingual words!

Language is such fun though, if one doesn't get stuffy. My late husband and I incorporated many deliberately mispronounced words into our vocabulary, such as pamplemoose, wagnons, vin ordinary, betteraves.

You mentioned punctuation and the subtleties of grammar. I had them drilled into me and promptly and thankfully forgot them. But the subconscious is a strange thing. I recognize a misspelling, a grammatical error, automatically. I'd probably make a great proofreader.

Apart from all that drivel, I'm a fan. My older brother turned me on when I was very young. He read me *Erewhon*, and while Butler might not have thought of himself as a science fiction writer, he'd qualify for fantasy.



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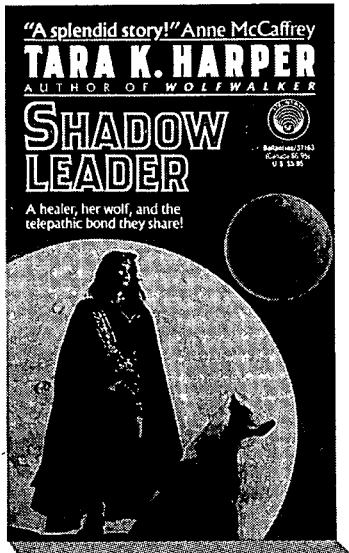
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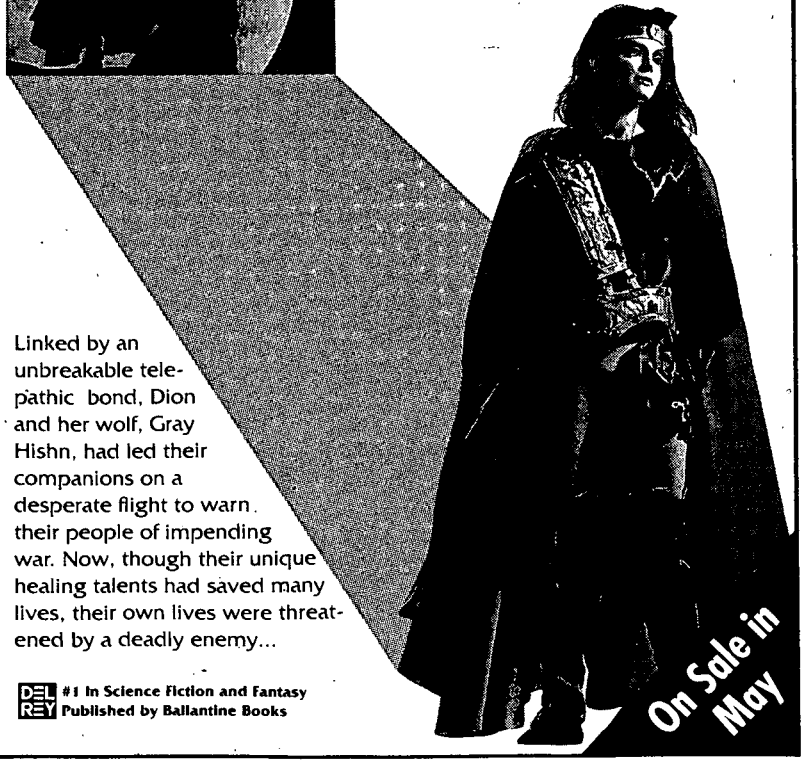
—Anne McCaffrey



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At risk of offending you, I must say that I am pleased that you don't appear in the latest edition in that T-shirt. Being a little ridiculous among friends is okay, but a readership like yours surely would prefer to think of you and vizualize you as the man of intelligence that you are, not an aging hippy. Clothes don't make the man, but they do give us the man we want to see and, since you are a very public person, you do owe us an image.

Is Ray Bradbury still alive and writing? His command of language was something special. *Dandelion Wine*, though not perhaps science fiction or fantasy, was so evocative. The salty, nutty taste of one's knees on a summer day, and the motes flying in a blue sky that one tried to track but they sank out of sight as one's eyes turned to follow them. When grown-up, of course, I realized or was told that those motes were, in fact, something to do with the eyeball itself.

Orson Scott Card is another superb writer and I am waiting impatiently for the third in the Alvin Maker series.

Sincerely,

E. Graham
Vancouver, B.C.
Canada

*I assure you that Ray Bradbury is alive and well and is, in fact, six months younger than I am. I trust that you understand that appearing in a T-shirt was not a matter of choice for me. It was a straight matter of promoting the magazine and promotion people grow fangs and horns if they don't receive cooperation. As for "aging hippy," well there are numerous people who labor under the impression that I am aging (I am one of those who so labor) but no one has ever called me a hippy before.*

*—Isaac Asimov*

Dear Dr. Asimov, Mr. Dozois, and Ms. Williams:

A few comments on the Sep. 1990 issue: First, I liked Greg Egan's "The Safe-Deposit Box." I found it to be both moving and heartening (I find any suggestion that consciousness exists outside of the body heartening). However, I found the main character's access to his deposit box troubling. Is there any such thing as an unlimited access safe-deposit box? If there is a deposit box which any individual who knows the combination could open without identification, I imagine that renters of such boxes must fight their way to them through a crowd of suspicious DEA and IRS agents.

Second, I thought Patricia Anthony's "For No Reason" was quite moving, and Ronald Anthony Cross's "Two Bad Dogs" was very funny. These are both extremely talented writers, and I hope to see more of their work.

Third, I thought R. Garcia y Robertson's "Not Fade Away" was a wonderful story. I think that Garcia is one of the finest fantasy writers today.

Last, I teach English at a community college. As a rule, English teachers tend to sit up all night worrying about silly things like the difference between "loose" and "lose." In two stories in this issue, the verb "loose," which means to unfasten or untie something, is



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used in place of the correct verb "lose," which indicates that something cannot be found. Sorry to be so picayune, but errors in diction cause me to sit bolt upright in bed at 4:00 A.M.

Sincerely yours,

Paul E. Crumrine
1120 Illinois Avenue
Palm Harbor, FL 34683

*It is very difficult to tell when a person has actually lost the distinction between lose and loose and when a combination of less-than-perfect printing and proofreading is responsible. In my more cynical moments, I feel that sloppy English is the proud hallmark of the "he-man" American, who would be ashamed to speak precisely. Certainly, President Bush, for all his Yale-ness, does not seem to be at home with the language. Too busy recreating, I think.*

*—Isaac Asimov*

Dear Dr. Asimov,

On a train trip to Chicago last week I finally found time to read the April issue of *IAsfm*, a copy of which I'd picked up some time ago at a newsstand. I was intrigued by a piece having to do with one of my favorite writers, Ernest Hemingway, in a magazine by another one of my favorite authors, you!

Much as I was looking forward to the cover story, I was unable to finish Joe Haldeman's "The Hemingway Hoax." Mr. Haldeman is clearly a good writer, and possesses a knack for telling stories. What he seems to lack is good taste. I sincerely tried, but I just can't figure out why a writer of such talent needs to bring in such crude, foul language. What's the point? I can't see any connection with the story, or the theme, or the style.

And what probably surprised me most of all is that what Mr. Haldeman lacks in good taste, *IAsfm* has compounded with a lack of good judgement, by printing it.

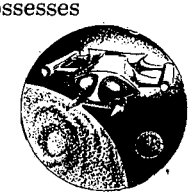
It will be some time before I'm inclined to purchase another *IAsfm*. Enough time for Mr. Haldeman to grow up, or your editorial staff to gain some better judgement. Who knows how soon that will be?

Cordially,

Michael L. Firlik
Grand Rapids, MI

*Alas, that is the fashionable way of writing these days. The crude, foul language you complain of always existed. When I was in the army, I found to my astonishment that no simple declarative sentence could be heard anywhere in its wide precincts which did not contain foul and unnecessary obscenity. Now that writers are no longer prevented from presenting people as they are, they make use of such language. Oddly enough, while we get letters complaining about the use of such language, we get no letters complimenting me on keeping my own personal fiction absolutely free of it. Apparently only scallions are handed out, no orchids.*

*—Isaac Asimov*





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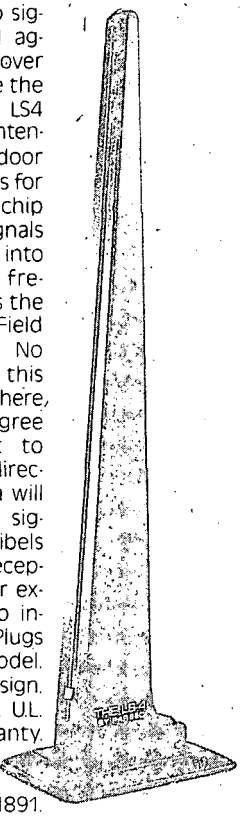

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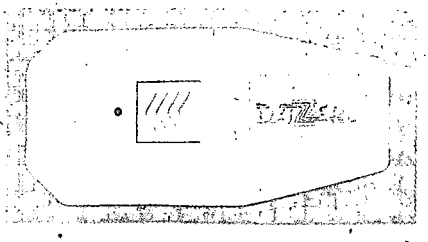

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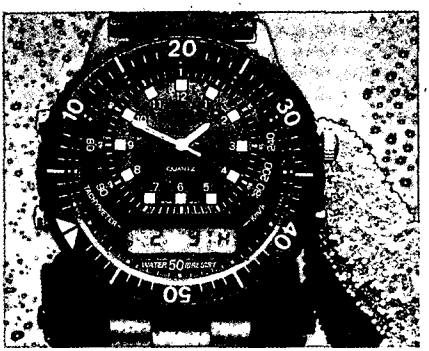


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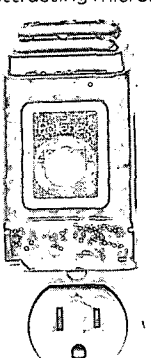

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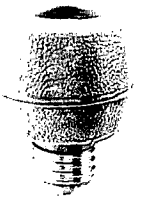

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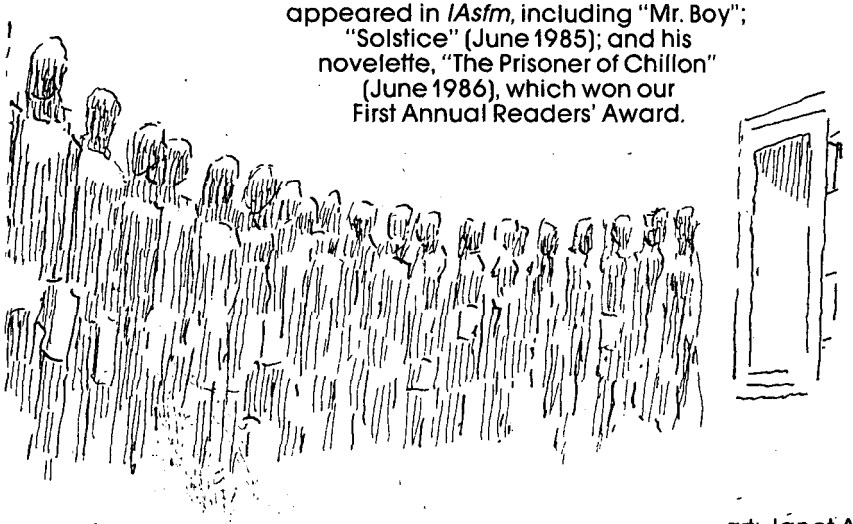
# STANDING IN LINE WITH MISTER JIMMY

by James Patrick Kelly

James Patrick Kelly's dynamic novella, "Mr. Boy" (*IAsfm*, June 1990), is currently a finalist for the Nebula award. Mr. Kelly is finishing up his fourth novel, *Wildlife*. It is based on a number of stories that first appeared in *IAsfm*, including "Mr. Boy"; "Solstice" (June 1985); and his novelette, "The Prisoner of Chillon" (June 1986), which won our First Annual Readers' Award.



art: Janet Aulisio

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So I'm walking down Hope Street on my way to the parole office and Mister Jimmy's playing my favorite, *Brain Sausage* by the Barking Fish, and I see this line. At first I think I'm having another flashback because it's mostly suits, in all the colors of gray. Silver ghosts in ash gray, mouse gray women, smog gray, sidewalk gray—maybe a couple of real misfits in navy blue. You know, the kind of yawnboys who sit at desks all day and talk to computers in Tokyo. So why should I care, except that I recognize a scattering of ralphs from Southie? One old grope of mine, Tweezer, is near the end and she's got on a white shirt and that stupid little ribbon tie she has to wear when she flips nineteen cent McKrillwiches and over it is this sports jacket the color of a recycling sack with sleeves down to her knees. I guess it must have been dark when she stole it.

Mister Jimmy goes, "She's the one who wanted to be a dancer," but I remember. I'm not as stupid as he thinks I am. "Check it out, Chip," he goes and because he's my thinkmate, I do.

"Hey Tweeze, where's the party?"

She looks too tired to flirt, like she's been sleeping in somebody's closet again because she doesn't go "Hi Chip," or "I'm the party," or anything. She just stares through me like I'm made of glass.

Then there's a hand tapping my shoulder and the suit behind me goes, "No cutting, mister. End of the line is way back."

I brush the hand off without bothering to look. "Snap off, jack. My sister here is saving my place. Right, Tweeze?"

She goes, "You ain't my brother," and her face is like a wall and I realize something has happened to her. Maybe it's the clothes, or the company she's been keeping.

The suit in front of us is giving me the hard eye, as if he's remembering me to describe to the cops. And the hand comes back. It's heavier this time. I think about biting it, but Mister Jimmy goes, "Better not, Chip, or we'll be late. Let me look into this," and he starts playing my favorite, *Double-parked on Trouble Street* by 54321 and the music walks me out of there. But I'm still putting Tweeze down for payback.

Anyway, the line is a lot longer than I thought. It ripples down Hope Street, a wool-blend snake with a couple of hundred heads and no personality. When it takes a right on Chelsea Avenue, it changes. As I walk alongside I can't help but sense an edge to it that's sharp enough to draw blood. For beautiful people they're in an ugly mood. Maybe they're not used to lines. This one stretches three blocks down Chelsea until it passes an Infomart and turns down an alley which I never knew was there before. I've got to see this—there's a handful of other ralphs wandering down the alley who feel the same way. After all, you don't usually find that many suits so far from downtown. So we scope the front of the line



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which stops at a white-painted steel door hung on a steel frame built into the brick wall. No sign, no buzzer, no handle, no keyhole. Could be the back door to the Infomart but Mister Jimmy thinks no.

Now this door bothers me—did I say it was white? I mean spotless, whiter than the Pope's sheets. That kind of clean is hard to find in the city. Still, Mister Jimmy is telling me this is probably a whole bunch of nothing and I might believe him except that the pigeon-gray suit at the head of the line is watching this door like it's going to have his baby right there on the pavement. And the woman behind him is sweating even though it's a cool spring day and the alley is in deep shade. And the people behind her are practically vibrating. Then the door opens and everyone who's not in line crowds over for a peek.

You know how, when you get a headful of glitter, you can stare at something ordinary and it gets like more and more real until it pulses into that weird, sparkly hyper-reality that means you're flashing? I see a long hallway lit by a single naked bulb. There's another white door at the far end. The cement floor has just been hosed down because there are still puddles around the drain. Someone has painted the words "Live" and "Free" on either wall. The building's breath is moist and warm and it smells like the corners of basements. The lucky leader mumbles as he steps through and I pull Mister Jimmy out of one ear so I can hear, ". . . full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women and blessed is the fruit . . ." The suit takes the plugs of his own ThinkMate out and slips them into his pocket as he walks down the hall and just before the door shuts behind him, I think I see the puddles start to sparkle like I'm having a flashback.

The woman next in line pulls out a limp handkerchief and wipes her forehead.

"Hey Jackie!" One of us innocent bystanders goes up to her. "What are you waiting for?"

She glances at him and tightens her grip on her attache case like she wants to hit him with it but thinks twice because she's got better things to do—like worry about the door opening.

Someone next to me goes, "They don't say. They won't answer questions." A guy in a croaker goes, "New drug, maybe?" and a couple of people nod but then someone else goes, "Nah, you don't stand in line in broad daylight waiting for drugs," and the first guy goes, "Maybe it's so new, it's still legal."

A suit farther back in line calls out, "Leave her alone."

"Hey jack, I was just asking . . ."

"Line up and find out for yourself."

A couple of newcomers come snooping down the alley. "What is this anyway?"



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So I go, "Mass hallucination—watch out, it's catching." I laugh when they pull up short. The woman twists her handkerchief as she waits her turn.

Now I really do want to find out what's happening here but, like Mister Jimmy says, the clock is ticking so I head back to the street. I mean, there are all kinds of lines. Food lines, job lines, ticket lines, tram lines at rush hour, lines in front of stores whenever there's something you can afford, which isn't often. Line up to get your check from the state and again to get it cashed. They say when you're on maintenance, you should get on every line you can find. Maybe that works for the good citizens but I haven't got the patience. Still, I've never seen two hundred yards of jacksuits before, homeowners with leather shoes and credit cards. Whatever's behind the door, it's worth something to people who already have a lot—and to ralphs like poor Tweezer, who's wearing a man's sports coat. I keep waiting for Mister Jimmy to break in with the answer or advice or a song or something but he's quiet. A line with a secret. Yeah, sure I'm interested.

The Department of Corrections is in a building as ugly as Cleveland but not quite as big. Check-in sprawls across the entire seventeenth floor and it's the usual uproar. You have to take turns breathing as all the prolees squeeze toward the wall of receivers while their moms and lovers and accomplices try to look invisible as the cops thump by in their immense blue body armor, dragging handcuffed prisoners behind them like yellow duckies. I spot some ralphs I know, but I'm not here to party. I've made good time. I got the page at 9:00 and it's only 10:37. The parole office gives you two hours on a random check so I'm not really worried as I place my palm flat on the reader and fit my concuff into the receiver. Then the little green screen flashes. *Ved Chiplunkar, 1102298, report to Room 1841.* Damn, I don't want to chat up some case hack, I just want to get verified and get out. Anyway, Mister Jimmy plays the Screws' *Meat Sins* while I search for Room 1841 and that helps a little.

In a previous life, Room 1841 might have been a toilet, but now it's a windowless pus-yellow cubby that is almost big enough for a desk, two folding chairs, a terminal and a skinny woman whose plastic ID says she's Angela Sternwood. She isn't much older than me but she's already got a job and a whiskey-colored suit and a string of fake pearls. She's easy enough on the eyes although she is a little beaky and I hate scented earrings.

"Tell me about yourself, Ved."

"Read the file—or are they hiring illiterates now?"

"I want to hear it in your own words."

It's a dumb line but I'll forgive a redhead almost anything so I go, "Name's Chip. I'm twenty-four and I've got two convictions, one for pos-



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session of glitter, one for mugging a suit so I could score some glitter. My cuff says I'm clean. I wish it was wrong."

"You graduated from South High and were accepted at War Martyrs Junior College but you never went. Why?"

"Didn't like the school colors."

"And you've been cashing maintenance checks since, let's see, '22?"

I ignore that because Mister Jimmy finally tracks down her public file. "DOB is 4/11/06—younger than you, Chip! She's a citizen, lives at 2381 Green Street up in the Heights and she's been working here less than a month, probably still in training."

She goes, "Would you please take your plugs out, Chip?"

I ignore her some more.

"Says here you haven't even tried for a job since your last check-in."

"I'm allergic to clocks." When I laugh, she looks nervous. "You're new at this job, aren't you?"

"Why do you say that?" She chews her lip. "Anyway, we're here to talk about you."

Mister Jimmy goes, "Keep on her, Chip. She's so raw they're probably still evaluating her on closed circuit. Who knows, maybe if she doesn't sell you a suit, they'll fire her."

She goes, "So you like taking maintenance? You live well on eighty-seven dollars a month?"

So I give her my best hope-to-grope smile. See, I don't really want to argue with Angela Sternwood. I want to take her out dancing and put my hands on her ass and later take her back to my place. Or better, her place—she probably has hot water.

She goes, "I said pull the damn ThinkMate so I can talk to you!" I've got her squirming now.

Mister Jimmy goes, "Better humor her, Chip," so I do.

I drop the plugs onto the desk and reach inside my shirt. "Want the system unit too?" It's in a pouch that hangs from a chain around my neck.

"No." She pulls a tissue from a drawer, picks a plug up with it, rubs the ear wax off and reads the label. Mister Jimmy is a genuine Matshushita. I can tell she's impressed because she goes, "Pricey tech for someone on maintenance." She pushes the plug back toward me. "Where'd you get it?"

"My pa left it to me instead of a ranch."

"Any idiot can make jokes, Chip." She checks the screen of her terminal. "Okay, what gang are you running with these days?"

"No gang—just me and Mister Jimmy against the world."

"Mister Jimmy?"



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I nod at the plugs on her desk and she goes, "You know an Elvis Malloy?"

"Uh-uh."

"Elvis Malloy was arrested at 12:48 last Tuesday night. Seems he's working this puppet house on Harmony Street in Southie, slipping into booths while the johns are busy slamming their robots through the orgies. He lifts at least six wallets, maybe more—not everyone reports, of course. Then somebody spots him. He flies out the front door with this naked guy after him and it just so happens there are two cops having coffee across the street. Malloy runs twelve blocks, flinging the swag into the crowds he passes. The cops catch him eventually but there's no evidence on him and nobody turns anything in, which isn't surprising considering the neighborhood."

"So Malloy wins the Nobel Prize for stupidity. So?"

Her mouth twists as she thinks this over. I can tell she's getting wrinkled at me. I don't think she's happy in her new job. "I'm sorry you're playing it this way, Chip, but it's your choice." She swivels the monitor around so I can see. "One of the cops who gave chase was rigged for vid. It's new tech, a pilot program. The computer enhancement takes time but we get some really cute pictures." I'm highlighted on the screen, framed between a floating ad window for Coors and a weather gypsy wearing three hats and seven coats. I'm staring at a brown wallet on the sidewalk in the foreground, also highlighted. "What do you think, Chip? Like it for the yearbook?"

I need Mister Jimmy's advice but I don't dare let her know that. "So I'm there. So's he." I point at the gypsy. "Talked to him yet? And probably others off camera. Where's your case? I never touched that wallet."

So then she loses her temper. "I don't need a case, mister. There's a time stamp on this vid that puts you on Harmony Street at 12:32 A.M."

"What? You're calling me on a curfew violation?"

"That's right. Maybe if I thought you were trying to turn yourself around, we could work something out." She raps the keyboard and the terminal mutters and suddenly a pink slip is sticking out of the printer slot like a paper tongue. "But you're not and you've got an attitude." She tears the slip out. "I take it you don't follow the news? Too bad. The feds are gearing up to build that new Friendship Highway through Mexico to keep our troops supplied. They've set manpower quotas for each state, which we're supposed to meet from our maintenance rolls. The governor says to sweep the streets and you're just the kind of trash voters tend to notice." She hands me the slip. "Report to the Reed Armory on National Unity Square before noon tomorrow. Don't forget your sunblock."

"Wait a minute." I jam Mister Jimmy back in and together we read the pink work order which says I'll be getting my mail at Jaltipan Work



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Camp in the Provisional State of Veracruz for the next six months. Mister Jimmy goes, "That's the steamiest part of the jungle, Chip. They get 100 inches of rain a year. I won't last two minutes in that kind of weather."

"This isn't fair," I go. "I'll appeal. You call this justice?"

"You want justice?" she goes. "Get a job." She stands up and brushes right past me and out the door with her big nose puckered like I'm a bad smell. I think about punching it for her but, as Mister Jimmy points out, that will only make the trouble I'm already in seem like a week at a disney.

So I hit the street again, feeling like I've just been force-fed a brick. I wander into the business district, the only living ralph in a desert of suits, and I'm headed nowhere with a scheduled layover in Mexico where the rain is a blunt instrument. Every so often I whang my concuff against one of the pipes set along the curb that used to have parking meters back when gas cost less than vodka. Doesn't hurt the cuff—that's indestructible—but it makes my hand sting which reminds me of what's coming if I don't think of something fast.

So why should I follow the news when it's always the same? "In Washington today the suits announced that taxes are too high and the president called on the poor ralphs of America to bend over one more time." *Whang*. Besides, I can tell that bitch would've been a frozen turkey in bed anyway. I gave her my best lines and she never even smiled. *Whang*. No question I have to show up at the Armory or else the alarm on my concuff will start shrieking and probably turn my brains to soup even before the cops come to haul me away. *Whang*. No, the only way to dodge Mexico is to get off maintenance and the only way to get off maintenance is to get enough money to live and the way to get that kind of money is to get a job but jobs are scarcer than ninth-grade virgins even if you do own a suit. Which I don't. *Whang*. Yeah, good advice, Mister Jimmy. Keep on her. She's new, see if you can push her around.

He goes, "We're in trouble, Chip. That climate rots electronics. You can't take me down there; I'm not designed for it."

"So I'll stash you somewhere. Hey, I'm pissed too."

"For six months, Chip? Six months of no input and I'll go crazy. And what if you don't come back? It's possible."

"Then I won't care, will I?" Problem is, you can't just turn a Thinkmate off like some stupid computer. I don't know why, exactly—Mister Jimmy is in charge of understanding all that tech stuff.

"You can lend me to someone, Chip."

"Who do I know would give you back?"

I'm so busy arguing with Mister Jimmy that I almost crash into this jack in a tuxedo except he sees me first. He puts his hands together like



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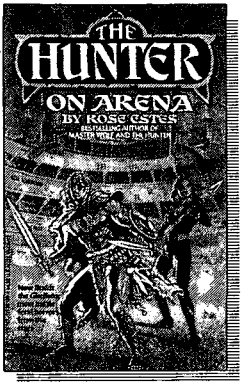


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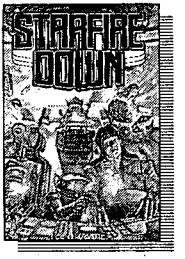


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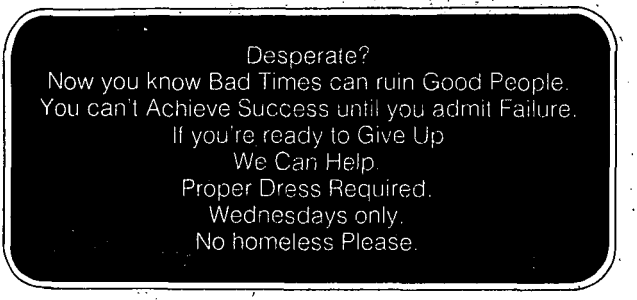
he's praying and then spreads them apart and somehow in the space between them he's projecting this window that says: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Now you know Bad Times can ruin Good People.
You can't Achieve Success until you admit Failure.
If you're ready to Give Up
We Can Help.
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No homeless Please.

"Snap off, I'm broke." I try to go around but he stays in my way. "You hear me? Maybe Jesus saves, but I don't."

But he won't let me pass until I notice him. Okay, so he looks like some groom who took a wrong turn at the wedding. He's wearing a high-necked white shirt and a cummerbund. His tux is black and there's a white carnation in the silk lapel. He's a little newt of a man with a peaceful, almost goofy expression you don't see much in the city. Maybe his bow tie is too tight and he's not getting enough oxygen.

So I'm thinking here's another flashback, which is okay because at this point I could use a little free hallucination and then it occurs to me. "Hey, this have anything to do with the line on Chelsea Avenue?"

He claps his hands again and between them are the words:

He shows me a smile that has about eight teeth too many. He says nothing.

"I was down there this morning. No one would tell what they were waiting for."

Still giving me his headlight smile, he claps his hands one last time and the window closes. He says nothing.



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"So what's this all about?"

He turns the smile off and shrugs.

"I'm asking you a question, man. What's behind the damn door?"

Mister Jimmy realizes I'm getting wrinkled at this jack so he tries to smooth me out with *Vegetable Kingdom* by Round Woman Square Men. But I don't want violins, I want answers. When I grab his lapels and shake him, his flower falls out and he makes this weird gurgling sound.

"Talk to me, you stupid jack."

So he opens his mouth and shows me all those perfect teeth again except there's nothing behind them but a pink hole. He's trying his best to say something but it sounds like he's swallowing a snake. I let him go. I tell him to shut his mouth but he won't. It's as if he wants to be sure I see his glistening stump waggle, as if he's *happy* someone cut his tongue out, as if it's the secret of his success and he wants to share it with me.

I spin away but he keeps after me, *"Ah-ahh-er-ah!"* and shoves an envelope into my pocket and then maybe he realizes I'm about to hit him because he pulls back.

I take a few steps before I turn again but by then he's disappeared. It's like the street has swallowed him. Suits bump by me on their way to lunch as ad windows glide over our heads. Business as usual in skyscraper land, so why am I shaking? Because what I really need now is about 10 cc's of glitter. Yeah, I'm that desperate—my brain feels like it's swelling up inside my head from too much thinking, and I've been on the verge of a flashback all morning. But I know Mister Jimmy is right when he reminds me that if my cuff shows positive for flash, they'll ruin me at the Armory tomorrow. I laugh because I guess I just qualified for the line on Chelsea Avenue. This is the worst day of the worst life ever lived and since I can't get anything I want, maybe I *should* give up. So I take out the envelope and open it and there's Ben Franklin giving me the green eye and on the flip side the words "In God We Trust" have been circled in red. Maybe the reason I can't feel my feet touching the sidewalk is that I've never held a hundred dollar bill in my hand before. It's not as intense a flash as glitter, but it'll do.

Expose that much money to the air in Southie and the ralphs will smell it and come swarming, but maybe this happens all the time downtown because the suits pay no attention as I slide the money into the pouch next to Mister Jimmy's system unit. I start home with the clock running down and the score Questions 32, Answers 0. The obvious play is to forget what just happened and spend the little time I have left pissing this miracle down all my favorite toilets in the city. I'm really tempted but Mister Jimmy goes, "Chip, if you've got to pick between a



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suit and a shovel, there's a Salvation Army over on April 11th Street," which is not the advice I'm hoping for, even if it makes sense.

"But what the hell am I lining up for?"

"Maybe a chance to get out of Mexico. So far all I know is that a Live Free Foundation was established as a tax-exempt charitable trust in New Hampshire four years ago. There's no annual report and somebody got the IRS to seal the returns but at least we know they file so they're probably legitimate. I say we have to check it out."

Now I'm worried because probably is a luck word and my luck is usually bad. What I really want is a sure thing except the only one I've got is six months of laying blacktop in green hell. I guess Mister Jimmy has a point: when you're desperate, you take chances.

So an hour later a new Chip trick-or-treats down Chelsea Street, disguised in a gray woolet suit and a blue shirt and plastic loafers. I've shortened the pants and fixed the ripped lining with K-Mart fashion tape but there was nothing I could do about the shoulders. The whole outfit cost only twenty-three bucks and they even threw in a tie the color of dead pizza. So I'm properly dressed and I've got seventy-seven bucks left from the angel in the tux and nine from the wallet Elvis Malloy threw away on Harmony Street together with my life savings of twelve and I'm wondering how much luck ninety-eight dollars will buy. Mister Jimmy is finishing *Contents Under Pressure* by Vinnie's Ear as I come up to the line.

I watch for Tweeze but she must have already gone through the door. The line is shorter—the end is near the corner of Hope and Chelsea, in front of Tibawi's Discount Flooring Outlet. I almost don't get on because of the old lady carrying the dog. I hate dogs, especially rich people's greedy, stupid, useless dogs. This one is losing patches of its wiry fur and it smells like an old couch someone left out in the rain.

The lady turns and scopes me and I scope her and I guess neither of us likes what we see. She probably doesn't approve of browns—or blacks or spanics or asians. She's wearing a cement-colored jacket over a matching skirt and there's a silk scarf around her neck held together with a fat gold ring that I bet I could get fifty bucks for, if it's real. She has gray hair so fine you can see her pale scalp. There's a glaze of dried dog slobber on her sleeve.

I go, "Hi." She says nothing. She doesn't seem very desperate. Maybe she couldn't get tickets to the opera.

She nods at me, shifts the dog into a more comfortable position and faces forward again. The dog scrabbles up and watches me over her shoulder.

The line creeps forward. Business is terrible at Tibawi's Discount Flooring Outlet. The price tags for the oriental rugs draped in the display



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window have faded in the sunlight. Up ahead the lawn and lowlight moss carpets are turning yellow around the edges. A wide bearded man with all the charm of a hammer stands behind the door and scopes us like he's thinking of closing up and getting in line too. He'd better hurry and make up his mind because now there's a fidgety guy in a charcoal three-piece behind me. Two more men are arguing about palladium futures on the Mercantile Exchange as they settle in behind him. Then a ralph in a silver and black Raiders jacket comes up and asks what we're waiting for and the old lady goes rigid. When I see the glitter in the ralph's eyes, I decide I'm not talking to this flashface about my troubles. They're none of his damn business and besides, thinking about them only makes me crazy. I'm not admitting to him or anyone that I don't exactly know why I'm here. Hey, I don't exactly know why I was born or where my mom went to or why shit stinks, okay? I'm not happy about being ignorant but there it is. So I tell him to snap off except it takes a while for him to understand what with all the beautiful sparks flashing inside his head. As he leaves, I scope the suits in line behind me and even though they glance away, I'm sure they're glad I got rid of the ralph because they didn't want to answer questions either. You don't admit to strangers that you're desperate—it's hard enough admitting it to yourself. But I can smell their fear, or maybe it's my own stink I smell. I wonder if this is what happened to Tweezer. The line has a grip on me. I'm not sure I can get away anymore.

Anyway, we're all the way up to the corner when Angela Sternwood stalks by without noticing me. Maybe it's my new suit but I doubt she's seeing much at all. She's so angry that her knees don't bend when she walks and her face is all wrinkled like she's thinking of things she wished she had said to someone. Not me, I hope. I almost fall into the street when she gets in line.

"Sternwood!" I lean way out and wave, trying to get her attention. "Hey, Angela!" She's too busy drilling holes into the sidewalk with her eyes and then the line swings me around the corner onto Chelsea. The dog sneezes and the old lady coos and kisses it. Maybe she feels safer with me now because she goes, "He's sick, poor baby, but I know they can cure him," but I don't want to talk to her. I want Angela. It takes maybe thirty seconds before I overdose on curiosity and walk back. Mister Jimmy's shriek is like a nail in my ear so I yank him out. Hey, the line's moving along and I'm only losing nine places.

I go, "Shouldn't you be downtown taking milk money away from orphans?"

She gives me a look that's about as friendly as a fist—then she recognizes me. "Oh, *no*. What the hell are you doing here?"

"I was in line up ahead. I came back to keep you company."



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Her eyes get shiny. "Jesus. I don't deserve this." A tear trickles down her face. "Leave me alone."

I like the way she cries. Some people gush, others sniff and try to hold off, but most of them are just crying for the crowd. Angela's tears are her own. She's not ashamed of them, she's not proud—they're something that happens sometimes when the world smacks you in the face and there's no one you can hit back.

"Hey, you'll never get to know me if you keep sending me away." I don't tell her I'm attracted to women who ask me to leave them alone.

"Listen ralph, I don't like you in a suit any better than I liked you in a T-shirt."

"Seems to me we're standing in the same line."

She doesn't have to answer because the line gathers itself and we press forward. When I pop Mister Jimmy back in, he has calmed down. We shuffle around the corner and down Chelsea maybe ten yards before everything bunches up again and stops. People mutter and groan and straddle their briefcases and glance at their watches and go up on tiptoes to see ahead. The suit in back of me starts whistling like he's on his way to the circus. He's bald but he's got a gray beard so thick it looks like his head is on upside down. The guy in front of Angela opens a readman and cups his hand so that only he can see the screen.

Meanwhile I scope Angela from behind. She has the long slender fingers of a guitar god—no rings—and the kind of leg muscles you don't get sitting on a couch in front of sitcoms. Her red hair is cut to a silky brush. I decide I could find my way past her nose. Sure, I'd grope her, if only she wasn't who she was.

Eventually she gets tired of pretending I'm not staring. "Where'd you get those clothes? The Salvation Army?" Her tears have dried up.

"I found them on the sidewalk on Harmony Street."

"You shouldn't make so many jokes, Chad. People who are really smart don't try so hard to prove it. You know, if you had played straight with me, I wouldn't have sent you to Mexico."

"Maybe I'm not going. Maybe that's why I'm on line here."

"You think they'll take you?" She shakes her head. "Well, maybe they will. You want to hear what kind of trouble jokes can get you into? I made a joke today, because you made me angry." She frowns. "No, it wasn't only you; it was the hundred prolees I saw before you. None of you wanted anything to do with me. You wouldn't let me help, you insulted me. But of all of them, Chad, you were especially irritating, because you have a brain and you're wasting it."

Mister Jimmy goes, "Want to know why she's here? I checked her public files. Congratulations, Chip, I think you just got your new case hack fired."



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"They didn't care that I gave you the pink slip, you know. I've got quotas to meet; that's what they hired me to do. But they said I got too involved with the interview. I made this joke, you see. I told you to remember your sunblock, and so Friday is my last day. They said that I wasn't professional enough. They want case officers who can maintain proper distance."

She's the one who hurt me, right? So I should enjoy watching her fall into a hole—but I can't. Maybe it's because people all around us are eavesdropping. The jack behind me is practically resting his beard on my shoulder. I'm sure they've already decided that we're both losers. I go, "Seems like they make it awfully easy for a ralph to fuck up in this city."

"I'm no ralph." I should've known she'd be insulted. "I went to junior college, I passed the civil service exam. These people aren't ralphs."

"What are they doing here, then?"

"The same thing you're doing."

"Trying not to go to Mexico?"

That shuts her up for a while. The line drags us past the Chelsea Drugstore and Superior Public Showers—*Our Water Guaranteed 100 percent Non-Toxic.* The fragrance of hot oil as we go by Felipe's Fish Fry reminds me that I haven't eaten yet today. I'm hungry enough to pick onion rings out of a dumpster.

"I'm sorry, Chad." Angela slumps with her hands in her pockets and her head down, not giving me much of a target. "I'm more sorry that I got fired, but I guess I'm sorry for what happened to you too."

"Sure, except it's Chip."

"What?"

"Name's Chip, not Chad. What's wrong with taking maintenance like the rest of the world? At least until you find another job."

"You don't understand." She shook her head. "Once there's a maintenance flag in your files, personnel assumes you're probably employment-impaired. I'd be lucky to find something at minimum wage. Maybe if I had some savings I could live off while I searched on JobLink . . . but I don't and I've got rent, food, net, transcard. I owe five more years on my student loan."

So that's why the only work they ever offered me was scraping gum off bus seats. Mister Jimmy is trying to distract me with *My Career (in Air Conditioning)* by Cheap Wine which normally makes me laugh, except he should've told me I never had a chance for a real job. But just when I'm ready to call him on this, the suit in front of us gets careless and tips his readman so that I can see. One screen has my angel's message about Bad Times and Giving Up, the other has the same words, but



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arranged in different order like they're in some kind of code. I nudge Angela. "See that?" I whisper.

"So?" She shrugs. "It's all over JobLink." She speaks loud enough for the suit to hear and he slaps the readman shut. "Come to think of it, where did you see it? You're on maintenance, you can't afford to subscribe to the net."

"A guy walks up to me in the street and opens a pocket window. I get a peek and that's all. He doesn't say a word and then he's gone." I leave the $100 out because I've got more audience than I want, even if they are all rich suits. "I'm still waiting for someone to tell me what it means."

"*Space*, my friend." When the jack with the beard leans forward, I can smell all the bars on DuPont Street. "We're bound for the new L5 colony, *Freedom Station*."

Angela rolls her eyes toward the corner of the sky where lunatics play house. She goes, "All I know is that some foundation with more secrets than the CIA started running the ad about a week ago. A guy from the sixteenth floor answered it last Wednesday and he must've gotten some offer because he never even bothered to come back and clean out his desk."

"Isn't it *obvious?*" The spaceman butts back into our conversation. "Live *Free*? If we're going to survive as a species we have to *free* ourselves from the gravity well. Break the chains of Earth. The Department of Space needs the *best*, the brightest and the bravest. The new *pioneers*." What's obvious is that he's one of those ravers who have everything figured out—wrong.

"That's not what I heard." The suit behind him speaks up. "My cousin lives in New Hampshire and she says that the Liberty Party is building a new co-op up in the White Mountains and they're supposedly recruiting business people to help run it."

"I've been watching since nine this morning," someone else goes. "I've circled the block I don't know how many times. So far a couple of thousand have gone in—at least that many—but nobody's come out. Don't they reject *anyone*?"

"I heard it was the Charismatics. They'll take anyone they can get."

"You think *God* is waiting behind that door?" The spaceman sniffs. "Sure it's not the Blue Elves? *Listen, Freedom Station* opens in just three years. . . ."

I go to Angela, "Maybe they can't leave."

"What?"

"Maybe they're rounding up warm bodies for the army. Or wasting everyone who steps through the door? *Boom.*" I shoot the spaceman with my finger. "Instant population control." I don't necessarily believe it, I'm



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just saying it to get a reaction. They're quiet for about three seconds and then they all turn on me, their voices sharp with fear.

"The cops wouldn't just stand by . . ."

". . . such a thing as the Constitution."

"Things are bad, but not *that* bad."

". . . the brain drain," goes the spaceman. "Maybe if all they wanted were people on *maintenance* . . ."

Mister Jimmy goes, "Easy, Chip, these are suits. They're not built for trouble; scare them and they might do something stupid."

"Okay," I go, "okay, you're right," and I hold up my hands to surrender but they're too nervous to take any prisoners. What saves me is a couple of asian ralphs in mirrorshirts who are swaggering down the street like they're trying to decide which one of us to mug first. As they approach everyone stops arguing and gives them the hard eye, including me. I'm surprised at my reaction, but it's like I have no choice. I'm in line too, aren't I? We've come this far together and we've all got our places to protect and no ignorant street trash is going to stop any of us from getting where we're going.

One ralph ask the other, "What these jacks waiting for, man? Personality transplants?" The other snickers.

Nobody says anything after they pass. We scuff along for a few minutes in silence and the line loosens its grip on me. There's nothing to do but think, which is a pain. Mister Jimmy tries to help by playing my favorite, *Go Away Please Stay* by Lezbeth. It doesn't work. When I look back there's at least fifty suits lined up behind me but I feel like they're standing on my chest. What we need is a theme song. *Get in line, everything's fine here in the line with a mind of its own.* I ought to write that down and send it to Lezbeth except that's not something suits do. I don't belong here. Mister Jimmy reminds me of Mexico and tells me we're getting close to the end but then I think about a drain on a cement floor and those puddles. I know I just made that stuff up about shooting all of us. Still, it sure looked as if they had just cleaned up a mess, didn't it?

Mister Jimmy goes, "They're not killing anyone. This is America, Chip, and these are taxpayers. Cash cows—they can't afford to slaughter the herd. Besides, we haven't got any choice."

"So why should I trust you? You never explained about how taking maintenance meant I couldn't get a real job. You're supposed to tell me this stuff but no, I have to hear it from Angela."

He goes, "Your dad was taking maintenance when you were born, Chip, and you started taking on your own long before you got me. I didn't want to discourage you. Besides, it's not true that you can't get a job; it's just harder."



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"You should've told me."

Angela glances over her shoulder. "You talking to me?"

"Nah, I'm arguing with Mister Jimmy."

"Who's winning?"

It's no contest, I'd much rather talk to her than Mister Jimmy. When her earring catches the sunlight, it leaks perfume that must be laced with pheromones because it's all I can do to keep from putting my arms around her and nibbling. "What I don't understand," I go, "is why you're here. You could hit a friend for a loan to hold you over."

She pauses, inviting me to slide up beside her. "I graduated last month," she goes. "I only just moved here."

"Someone with your looks and you haven't got an old grope you could call?"

"It's been a rough month." She gives me a lemon smile. "I don't want to talk about it."

"Okay, how come you don't wear a Thinkmate?"

"I like to make my own decisions."

"Well, maybe you're smarter than me."

"Or you're lazier than me. You ever take that thing off?"

"Why?" The idea surprises me. "Like when?"

"When you watch vid—I don't know. At night, before you go to bed."

I bump gently against her. "Want to find out for yourself?"

She flushes and moves ahead of me again.

I can't decide whether she's teasing me or not. Mister Jimmy plays *Burning The Snow* by Penile Colony, which I decide I don't like as much as I used to. I tell him I don't want to hear any more music for a while. It's getting colder now as the sun touches the skyline. Whirlwinds of trash stir in the street. The line can't make up its mind anymore. It moves in spasms. Sometimes it surges, then it'll stop and catch its breath before crawling forward again. Probably some of the suits ahead are giving up and going home to meatloaf and clean sheets. They're not desperate enough. Angela doesn't seem that desperate. I wonder if I am.

One big push carries us across Martyrs Street and we're almost there. Up ahead the yellow Infomart window floats over the sidewalk and the come-on scrolls across in letters tall enough to start for the Celtics. *Infomart . . . more than just facts . . . knowledge.* The rest of the block is taken up by a used robot store called Machine Age. You can buy robot vacuums and lawnmowers, mobile video and smartcarts that will follow you anywhere, three-wheelers and food processors that'll turn a dollar's worth of soy paste into a meal for seven—if none of them are very hungry. There's a window full of ThinkMate clones and next to it are the puppets, lean sports models in bright uniforms and leering sex machines with big lips and glossy stain-resistant skin.



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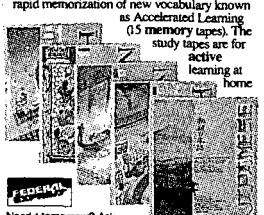


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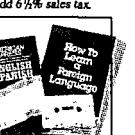


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Just ahead three suits peel off the line and scuttle back toward us like cockroaches someone is trying to squash. After they clear out I see that what scared them was a couple of cops in full riot armor. There's a patrol wagon with intimate seating for twenty parked in the alley. I guess even suits get arrested once in a while. These cops look strange to me although I'm not sure why exactly until Mister Jimmy points out the two bulges on their helmets, one for the spotlight, the other for the lens. They're IDing people at random. Looking for criminals in a line full of desperate people—it's such a good idea that I'm surprised the cops thought of it. "Be smooth, Chip," Mister Jimmy goes. "You're legal until noon tomorrow."

I touch Angela's arm. "That the rig they got me with?"

One of the cops clunks down the sidewalk, stops about ten feet from us and asks a suit to say his name.

Angela goes, "Yeah, only they use infrared at night. When they cross-reference your voice print with your picture, they can access all your G3 files right down to the dailies in under ten seconds."

Maybe I'd be worried if I'd understood what she said but information tech is Mister Jimmy's responsibility. Besides, the suit with the readman is frightened enough for both us. He's pale as bread as he turns to Angela "They can read *dailies*?" He's practically hissing.

She nods.

He tries to lunge past me but as long as I'm wearing a suit, I decide to play good citizen. I manage to stay in the way just long enough.

"Excuse me, sir." This cop could arm wrestle a backhoe. "Were you going somewhere?" He doesn't have any problem holding onto a limp suit.

The cop IDs the jack as Lawrence Prendergast, DOB 7/9/88, an employee of Atlantic Trust wanted for questioning on a charge of unauthorized use of a credit instrument. When the cop pats him down, he finds that Larry's paunch is actually a money belt stuffed with enough cash to buy a round of drinks for the entire city. Three minutes later, Larry's been cuffed, read his rights and loaded into the wagon. From the way the suits around me are staring, I doubt any of them have ever seen justice up this close.

"He's *lucky* they caught him here," goes the spaceman, "because on *Freedom Station* there's no *jail*. The budget was too tight."

Nobody says anything. We don't want to encourage him.

"You break the law up there and you'd better be able to breathe *space*." He laughs at his own joke. Somebody has to.

We finally reach the top of the alley. Colors are washing out in the twilight and it's hard to tell people from shadows. Soon the city will be gray enough to hide us all but by then it'll be too late. The white door



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has turned the color of bone. We're about fifteen yards away—twenty, maybe thirty people are ahead of us. Each step I take is a battle and I'm not sure anymore this is a war I want to win.

Mister Jimmy goes, "Steady, Chip, I can't do this without you. We're almost home."

I focus on the back of Angela's neck and follow her fragrance through the gloom. I must be losing it because I'm standing in line to jump off a cliff with a bunch of strangers and instead of panicking like any normal person, I'm hallucinating about how I'd feel if her head was on a green pillow and her eyelids were fluttering shut and her lips had parted for me. She's a jack suit and I'm a lazy ralph, but suddenly it's the most important thing in the world that she's a thrill I'll never have as long as I stand in this line. I touch her arm and she turns and now I have to speak even though Mister Jimmy tells me to keep quiet and I can't think, except words take me by surprise and I listen in amazement to what I'm saying.

"You lied when you said you didn't have any savings. Maybe it's not enough but you have something. You're not the type to let yourself go broke. How much, Angela?"

"Why should I tell you?"

I laugh because a snub from her steadies me more than all of Mister Jimmy's cheerleading.

"I'm not worth ripping off," she goes, "if that's what you're thinking." She waits for me to answer but I don't. It's up to her to decide if she trusts me. "Almost thirty dollars. Why, Chip?"

I'm thinking now and Mister Jimmy doesn't like that because that's not my job. "Chip, Chip! What is this?"

Up ahead the ugly little dog starts to howl. Maybe it's afraid of the dark. I unbutton my new blue shirt, draw out the pouch, pull my money from next to Mister Jimmy's system unit. I show it to her. "Thirty and ninety-eight is a hundred and twenty-eight. You could stay in my apartment for six weeks on that, easy. The rent's paid through May. So you live in a dive and you eat slop and you blow off your loan and spend the rest searching for a job on the net. The worst that can happen is that a couple of Wednesdays from now you line up again, only this time you go through the door broke. So what? Thirty bucks doesn't buy first class on the shuttle, believe me."

"*Excuse* me, ma'am," goes the spaceman, "but I hope you're not going to listen to this man. Are you *seriously* suggesting . . ."

I whip around and backhand him across the mouth. "Say one more word, jack, and I'll rip that beard off and stuff it down your throat." I glare at him and I know he's going to take it. Like all suits, he's got the



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backbone of a banana. The suits behind him mutter and disapprove but they're too busy thinking line thoughts to cause trouble now.

The dog's frantic yelping is cut off when the door shuts. I doubt it was appropriately dressed. The silence echoes in the cold. Angela hasn't budged and there's a gap between her and the suit in front of us.

"Move up," someone yells.

"Let's *go*." The line is impatient.

"I don't know what to say," she goes.

"Make sense? Not bad for a lazy ralph?"

"You're not joking?" I'm close enough to see her breath. I think about what it would be like to taste it. "You'd do that for me?"

"Sure and I'd do it for me too. I've got a life here. Maybe it stinks, but it's mine. You said Friday's your last day. What if you show up for work tomorrow and take me off the work roster and put me back on maintenance?"

"Brilliant, Chip," Mister Jimmy goes. "I didn't think you had it in you."

"I can't do that," she goes.

"Angela, the street price for deferral is two hundred, so don't tell me it can't be done. Now I haven't got that much so I'm asking a favor—from a friend. What are they going to do, fire you?"

She considers. "Where are you going to live?"

"Where the hell do you think? In my apartment with you."

I couldn't tell at first what she thought of the idea.

"Yes," goes Mister Jimmy, "and after Friday you can dump her whenever you want."

It's not his fault that he doesn't understand. He's like the line, he doesn't have an imagination. Still, I have to pull his plugs out and curl my hand around them.

There's only one suit between Angela and the door. She glances at him and then back at me. "I'm not sleeping with you."

"No?" I don't think she can see me smile. It doesn't matter. "Well, you'd better decide in a hurry because you're next and I'm sure as hell not charging through that door to rescue you."

She hesitates and I realize I'm losing her. Maybe Mister Jimmy is a better judge of character than I gave him credit for. I can feel his tinny scream buzzing in my fist.

"This is il*legal*," goes the spaceman. "I'm calling the police. Don't do it, young lady. You're turning down the *chance* of a lifetime." When I turn around to snap him off I realize I've made another mistake. He's backed out of reach and even in the dark I can see that he's holding a gun, or at least something which looks real enough to freeze me. "I'm



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not going to let *either* of you do this to yourselves. You're young. You've got your whole *future* in front of you."

I back away from the gun but it follows me. "Go ahead and shoot, you jack. Like you say, the cops are right around the corner. They like desperate people, desperate people are some of their best customers. The door is open, spaceman, but we're getting out of line. That makes you next. Better hurry or the shuttle will leave without you."

He looks at the open door, the naked bulb, the long cement hallway. There are more puddles than there were in the morning and they're *all* glittery. The line yells at us. "Move, *move*." The spaceman marches to the doorway like a war hero accepting his medal, turns and levels the gun at me.

In the light from the hall the gun looks even more real. When I stare at the barrel, it *sparkles* with reality because the flashback I've felt coming all day has finally arrived. The gun starts singing to me, "Come with us, Chip, come with us now. We've got everything you want and all you need to know." And the music walks me toward the white door which I finally realize opens onto the flash that never ends. "Can't let you go," sings the gun. "We love you so." And it sounds just like Mister Jimmy so I have to, I have to except that Angela kicks the door shut.

There's a sound like a gunshot that shatters my flashback. I stagger and Angela catches me and I put my arm around her. Maybe it's only the other door slamming.

I watch as everybody in line moves up one, and then I peel Mister Jimmy's contact lens from my right eye and drop it into the pouch with the plugs and the system unit.

Angela steers me toward the street. "Anyone want to buy a ThinkMate?" I go to the suits still waiting in line. "Hey, genuine Matshushita!" ●


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# LICHEN AND ROCK

## by Eileen Gunn

Eileen Gunn's captivating short stories have twice been finalists for the Hugo award. Lately, though, the author has been spending most of her time researching and writing two complicated novels. Luckily for us, she chose to take a brief respite from her books in order to fashion this delightful fable.

art: Pat Morrissey

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Once, some time ago, but not so far back that there is no one who remembers, there was a girl named in her language for a kind of lichen that clings to rocks near the shore. Now in our time, it would be considered odd to name your child after lichen, and perhaps it was so then. But her parents never offered her an explanation, and it's much too late for one now.

Lichen lived with her mother and father and brothers at the edge of the woods on the shore of a large, quiet arm of the ocean. The woods sheltered them, the water fed them, and small electronic devices told them stories. They lived as comfortably as anybody could.

In the summer, they ate fresh fruit and vat-grown mussels, and camped on the beach. In the winter, they ate freeze-dried potatoes and synthetic fish, and the children played near their father's house in the rain and mist.

When she tired of boys' games, Lichen played by herself on a large rock shaped like a whale.

It was a wonderful rock, for a rock—all grey and knobby, its surface patched orange and green with lichen. A large crack ran diagonally up one side, making it easy to climb. On top was a thick layer of mossy dirt, and a small fir tree grew on the whale's head. Lichen would lie on the moss and watch music on a tiny television.

A very long time before, when the world was young and whales swam in the ocean, the rock had been a real whale. But because it had splashed the Changer, it had been turned into a rock, good only for children to play on. This is why you should be careful when you are swimming and not splash other people.

But we were not talking about swimming—we were talking about the child Lichen.

One day, when she was playing with her brothers outdoors, strange creatures with large, gelatinous eyes like carp came and talked to her parents.

These were not the carp-eyed people you sometimes see now, who are merely retooled humans. These were different, and I don't know where they came from, but they're gone now, thank goodness.

Anyway, her parents listened to the carp-eyed creatures, who said that Lichen should be sent to school.

So she was taken far away and put in a huge house with lots of other children who had been taken from their parents. There they ate what the carp-eyed people ate and learned what the carp-eyed people wanted them to know.



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## II. She Learns Useful Things

For seven long years, Lichen lived in the huge house. She slept where they told her and wore the clothes they gave her and did the chores that were set aside for her. In turn, the carp-eyed creatures taught her many new things. They taught her to mend damaged circuitry by weaving around it with golden thread. They taught her to read the thoughts of a questioner in order to know the answer he wanted. And they taught her to hold in her mind as many as four contradictory ideas at once, and to act as if each was the truth, never quite losing her ability to sort the truth from the lies. This last skill was the hardest to learn, but proved handiest in the long run.

Some of these newly acquired skills brought corresponding disadvantages. Because of her skill at mending circuits, she was responsible for mending all the circuitry of all the administrators at the school. And her knowledge of a questioner's thoughts tempted her to tell people what they wanted to hear.

But her ability to find the truth in a mess of lies prevented her from believing too deeply in the lies she told other people.

She wrote letters to her parents in the language of the carp-eyed people. Her parents did not write back, but she knew that was because they could neither read nor write that language, so she was not as disappointed as she might otherwise have been. She wondered sometimes whether one or another of her brothers might learn, and if so whether he would write to her, but she never read a line from any of them. And she wondered all the time what she had done that her parents had sent her away and kept her brothers with them, and vowed to ask them when she returned home.

When the seven years were over, Lichen was told, she would be sent home, and she looked forward to that day. When it arrived, she was presented with a bill for the food she had eaten and the lessons she had learned. Since she had no money, she signed on for another seven years of service as payment.

But Lichen soon regretted her decision to stay. She spoke with people who had been there much longer than she, and they said that they always owed the school money, whenever they wanted to leave. They said that finally, when they were too old to work any more, they would be given silicon implants with gold and platinum leads and told that through the generosity of the carp-eyed people they were free to go. They said that this had happened to others, and was happening to them, and would happen to her.

So Lichen promised herself that she would never again mend a circuit or answer a question, and she ran away.



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## III. She Discovers Changes at Home

At first, running away was worse than staying where she was. At the school she had food when she was hungry and shelter when it was raining, but now she was cold and wet and had nothing to eat. She was separated from her friends and far from her family. At least, she thought, I don't have to repair circuitry all day.

She hid during the daytime and walked at night. And she expected nothing from other people, because she found that if she expected people to help her, she was sometimes rudely disillusioned, but if she expected nothing, she was often surprised very pleasantly.

When she arrived in her homeland, she discovered that her people had changed since she had gone off to school. They had been retooled, and parts of their bodies seemed to be attached in the wrong places—heads at the ends of their arms, hands where their heads should be. Instead of feet they had hearts or livers. Some used their lower arms as long, narrow feet and, raising their legs straight up into the air, thumped about with noses in the dust and hats on their toes.

When they spoke to her, they issued strange farts from the aorta, or wiggled eye-level fingers in frustration. Their mouths, at the ends of their arms or opening in the middle of their bodies or appearing like tattooed roses on their kneecaps, moved silently, like the mouths of fish.

Who had done these awful things to them? How did they manage to walk and talk and think when their heads and feet and mouths were every which way? Lichen asked a woman who gave her a handout what had happened and why everyone looked so strange.

We look strange to you? said the woman. Why, my dear, to us you look a bit old-fashioned—a bit boring, if you don't mind my saying so.

The new setup works just fine, said the woman. Ever stepped on a tack? Your feet can be pretty tender, you know. There are quite a few people whose hearts are much tougher than their feet. As for livers, well, it's true they are complex and delicate organs, but there's no arguing with some people. They just *know* they can use their livers harder than their feet.

But why, Lichen asked, have hands where your head should be?

Very simple, my dear, said the woman. Some people think better with their hands than they do with their heads, and it's only right they should look that way. And if you're the type to act before you think, you're better off with your hands up there like a headdress. It's a little clumsy, but it slows you down and gives your good sense time to catch up.

But why, asked Lichen persistently, would people walk with their arms instead of their legs or have their mouths open out of their knees?

Ah, said the woman with a shrug, there are always people who do



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something odd just for the sake of being different. I don't worry much about them, myself. And she shuffled off on her little heart-shaped feet, trailing dusty purple blood vessels.

As she got to know people better, Lichen decided that their peculiar anatomy worked as well as anything for them. They loved their children and lived their lives and weren't any more or less unhappy than people had probably ever been. And the soft, liquid sounds that issued from deformed mouths, like the rush of waves and the cooing of doves, were more beautiful than words.

## IV. She Puts Her Schooling to Use

Soon, however, carp-eyed people came to the town. They went from house to house, knocking on doors. Lichen, hiding under a porch, knew they were looking for her.

She followed them, staying just beyond the range of their sensors. When night came and they still hadn't found her, they curled up to sleep, right where they were when they got sleepy. People walked around them, giving them a wide berth.

How strange, thought Lichen, that nobody ever attacked the carp-eyed people while they slept. Perhaps if she got help. . . .

Lichen crept back down the street, toward the busy part of town. She approached first one person, then another, but she got the same answer from each of them. There was no use in attacking the carp-eyed people, they said, waggling the fingers that grew out of their ears, because anything that slept right out in the middle of the road like that obviously had nothing to fear. Use your head, girl, they told her, mumbling from mouths concealed in the palms of their hands. Get away while the getting is good, they whispered, skittering away on dirty, calloused arms.

Lichen went back to where the carp-eyed people were sleeping. At the school, they had never slept where the children could see them. In fact, she hadn't been sure that they slept at all. But now they were definitely asleep, membranes covering their huge, gelatinous eyes, tails curled cozily around their bodies. Through gaps in their gill coverings, she could see the gold wires of their circuitry.

And it was then that Lichen realized the value of an education. She reached forward with steady hands and disconnected the leads from their external memories. Of course the carp-eyed people woke immediately, but they were very confused. They didn't know who Lichen was, or even who they were themselves.

It's all right, said Lichen soothingly, you are only slightly damaged. Hold still.



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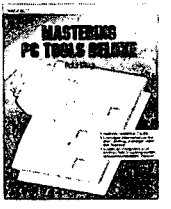


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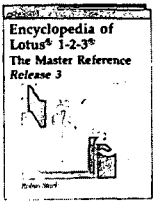


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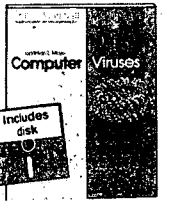


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And she reconnected the leads just a bit differently.

You'll be fine now, she said.

The carp-eyed people staggered to their feet. They wobbled about, taking very small steps and bumping into one another.

Best to get out of here, thought Lichen. I'll be going now, she said. Take care of yourselves.

The carp-eyed people thanked her, bowing erratically, as she walked off down the road.

## V. She Longs for Her Rock

Finally Lichen found herself on the road to her father's village. So many things had changed along the route. The land was tough, covered with layers of pebbles and tar. There were alien plants where the evergreens and berries had grown, and the shoreline was oddly displaced and redrawn.

When she arrived in the village, she saw nothing that looked familiar. Her parents were long dead, people told her. Her father's house was gone and the trees were much smaller than she remembered. The forest looked different, and the whale-shaped rock was not there where she remembered it. This puzzled her the most, for how could a rock go away? Where would it go? What would it do when it got there?

Suddenly, she missed the rock very much—more than her parents and brothers, in fact. She had already long since gotten used to being away from her family, but she had hardly thought of the rock at all and so was completely unprepared to lose it without notice.

The more she thought about it, the more perfect the rock seemed. The rock never scolded her, or made her do her chores. It never teased her, or snatched her toys. (Except once, when a tiny wooden doll had fallen into the crack and she couldn't get it out.) The best part of her childhood had disappeared with the rock.

A soft rain began to fall, and Lichen sat down in the grey-brown dirt under a hemlock. The road outside the circle of trees quickly became dark and wet. She listened to birds calling and branches creaking and, looking up the trunk of the hemlock, decided to climb the tree. She climbed easily, up and up. Soon she was above the forest canopy, looking down at the tops of trees.

Lichen climbed the tree up through the top of the sky itself, and found that there was another land there, much like the land that she had grown up in. The plants were familiar, the hard road was gone, the air was steeped in the sharp incense of wet forest.

I wonder if I could find my parents' house, she thought, and she set



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off in what looked like the right direction. Sure enough, it was just around a turn in the path, and her parents were standing by the door as if waiting for her.

She greeted them respectfully and asked after their health and that of her brothers. Her parents told her nothing about themselves, but said that her brothers were doing quite well, being creators of robots and possessors of property, with pleasant wives and happy children.

Lichen and her parents sat round all evening, eating fried bread and talking about old times. Finally, there came a lull in the conversation, and Lichen asked her parents why they had sent her away.

You didn't know? they asked. It seemed obvious to us. You were the youngest and the liveliest, and yet you knew nothing but rocks and trees. To get along with the carp-eyed people, you would have to be someone very different—and you would need to know far more than we could teach you. So we sent you to their school.

Didn't you learn something of value there, her parents asked, something that we could not have taught you?

As they spoke, Lichen realized she knew the answer her parents wanted. They didn't want to hear about mending circuits or about loneliness. They wanted desperately to know that they had done the right thing and that her life was better and happier because of it.

Lichen was not sure that she could tell them that. Was she better off for having been sent away?

Well, she thought, if I hadn't been sent to school, I wouldn't have known how to rewire those carp-eyed people. But if I hadn't been sent to school, I wouldn't have run away, and they wouldn't have chased me.

Who knows? she said to her parents, finally. Would I be who I am if I wasn't me?

Perhaps your brothers can tell you, said her mother.

## VI. She Visits Her Brothers

Her parents told her how to find the spot in which her brothers were now living. Then they led her to a patch of bare ground and told her to dig. She dug through a crust of hard-scrabble dirt and found that the earth got softer below. Then, with a lurch, her spade broke through into a hole, and she could see an ocean of stars beneath her. She looked up at her parents in surprise, and lost her balance. Lichen fell down into the stars, into the night beneath the stars, and into the modern countryside she had left the day before, landing in a pile of hemlock branches that broke her fall. She looked back up toward her parents. The hole was closing, and her parents were peering down at her with kindly concern.



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She thought she saw them wave as the hole disappeared, leaving nothing but stars overhead.

How strange, thought Lichen. Are there more worlds nested inside this one? Wondering about this, she fell asleep.

When she woke up under the hemlock tree, it was morning. Following her parents' instructions, she walked to the area where her brothers lived. It wasn't in the woods at all, but in town, on a street of small, cheaply made cottages.

She knocked at the door of the first cottage, the one belonging to her oldest brother, but he wouldn't let her in. Then she knocked at the door of the second cottage, belonging to her next-oldest brother, but he told her to come back later. Finally, she knocked at the cottage door of the brother who was closest to her own age, and he opened the door and invited her inside.

Lichen was surprised by how small the house was, and how uncomfortable—stuffy, cold, and crammed with dirty electronic equipment in stages of disrepair. Her brother didn't look so different. His face was the same, except for a fringe of fingers like a beard along the ridge of his jaw.

His wife, a worried-looking woman with a very small second head looking over her left shoulder, frowned at Lichen, and the tiny face refused to meet her eyes. Two skinny, snuffling toddlers whined and grabbed at their mother's skirt. They had not been visibly altered.

After a few polite remarks had been exchanged, her brother asked her about school. Lichen tried to give a neutral answer, but as she talked, her brother's manner changed and the tone of his voice became surly. She had been allowed to go away to school when they were forced to stay home as drudges. What made her so important anyway?

She had lived a life of luxury, working only four hours a day, learning to read and figure for another four, and having the rest of the day to sleep in a nice, soft bed and do what she wanted, while they stayed home, working hard, often hungry, forced into dreary work for little money.

Listening to her brother, Lichen got angry. She quickly gave him her view of his life, in which he lived comfortably from season to season, working with their father, going to dances and parties. Eating mussels and berries, potatoes, bread fried in fat.

Her brother looked annoyed at first. Then he smiled, and Lichen smiled too. He chuckled, and Lichen did also. And then they both started laughing. They laughed until the tears ran down their faces, until their sides ached, until the brother's wife stuck her heads into the room to see what spirit had taken possession of them.

If there is a moral to be derived from this—and it gives pleasure to storytellers to derive a moral, whether the listener needs it or not—it



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is that we should be careful in our estimate of how happy everyone else is, and of how miserable we are ourselves.

## VII. The Whale Figures It Out

After they talked, Lichen and her brother went for a walk along the cliff above the beach, because Lichen wanted to see all the things that had changed since she had been there as a child.

She asked about the whale-shaped rock.

It was in the way, he said. The carp-eyed people were building something very important, and trees and rocks had been cleared from the land and dumped on the beach.

In fact, he said, it ought to be down there, right around that point. Lichen ran ahead. But there was no whale-shaped rock down below. She waited until her brother caught up, and together they looked around. There was no trace of it.

Maybe they broke it up, he suggested.

Suddenly, there came a loud splash from the water, and a cold shower of salt spray drenched them from head to foot. A killer whale leaped in the water below them. The whale swam close to shore and called Lichen's name. It was her rock.

Lichen looked down from the edge of the cliff, and the whale told her his story.

When the carp-eyed people moved the rock, the whale explained, he was released from the spell of the Changer and leaped back into the ocean.

I splashed those jellyeyes, said the whale, splashed them good. They were wet when I finished with them, I'll tell you. It made their circuits work funny, and they waved goodbye as I swam off.

I have figured it out, said the whale. This is a time like that of the Changer. The jellyeyes changed our home and made it theirs. It may be that this is what our world will be like for a long time, or it may be that new changers will come to prey upon these. But a time will come when there is an end to change, and the earth itself will cast the changers aside.

Climb onto my back, he said to Lichen, and we will wait this out until things shift back in our favor.

Lichen leaped down onto the whale.

At the first touch of Lichen to his back, the whale turned to rock, and so did Lichen and her brother. Some say that the three of them can be seen there even now, a bare rock on the cliff and a lichen-covered one



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at the shoreline, waiting for the time when the earth will awaken and shake the changers off like fleas.

## VIII. Her Ambitions

Now, that's how the story is told by some devices, but that is not at all what happened. Lichen did not leap onto the whale, and the whale did not turn into a rock. I know this for a fact.

When the whale told Lichen his story about changers coming one after the other to disrupt the lives of humans and animals and even the lives of things that were neither human or animal, Lichen realized that the time had come for her to cast aside the lies by which she had been living and to grasp the truth.

She thought about her childhood, and all that had happened to her since. She thought about the retooled people, shuffling happily through their lives. And she thought about the way she had changed those carp-eyed people around.

No, she said to the whale. Don't go back. Come with me, and we'll change ourselves around. We'll rewire the carp-eyed people. We'll remake this land for the better, or maybe for the worse.

Come, she said to her brother. Change how you live and what you do. Make your children fat and happy, and give your wife something to smile about.

Come, she said to both of them. If we can change this much, we can change the Changer himself.

The whale grew legs and began to walk about as if he were human, cautiously at first, then with greater confidence. He still had pretty much the appearance of a whale, but Lichen thought this was to his advantage.

With the whale and her brother, Lichen walked away from the beach to change the world, and if she didn't do a better job than anyone had already, she didn't do a hell of a lot worse. ●

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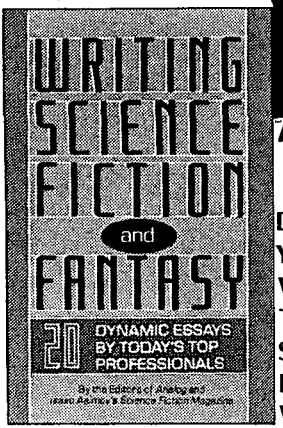


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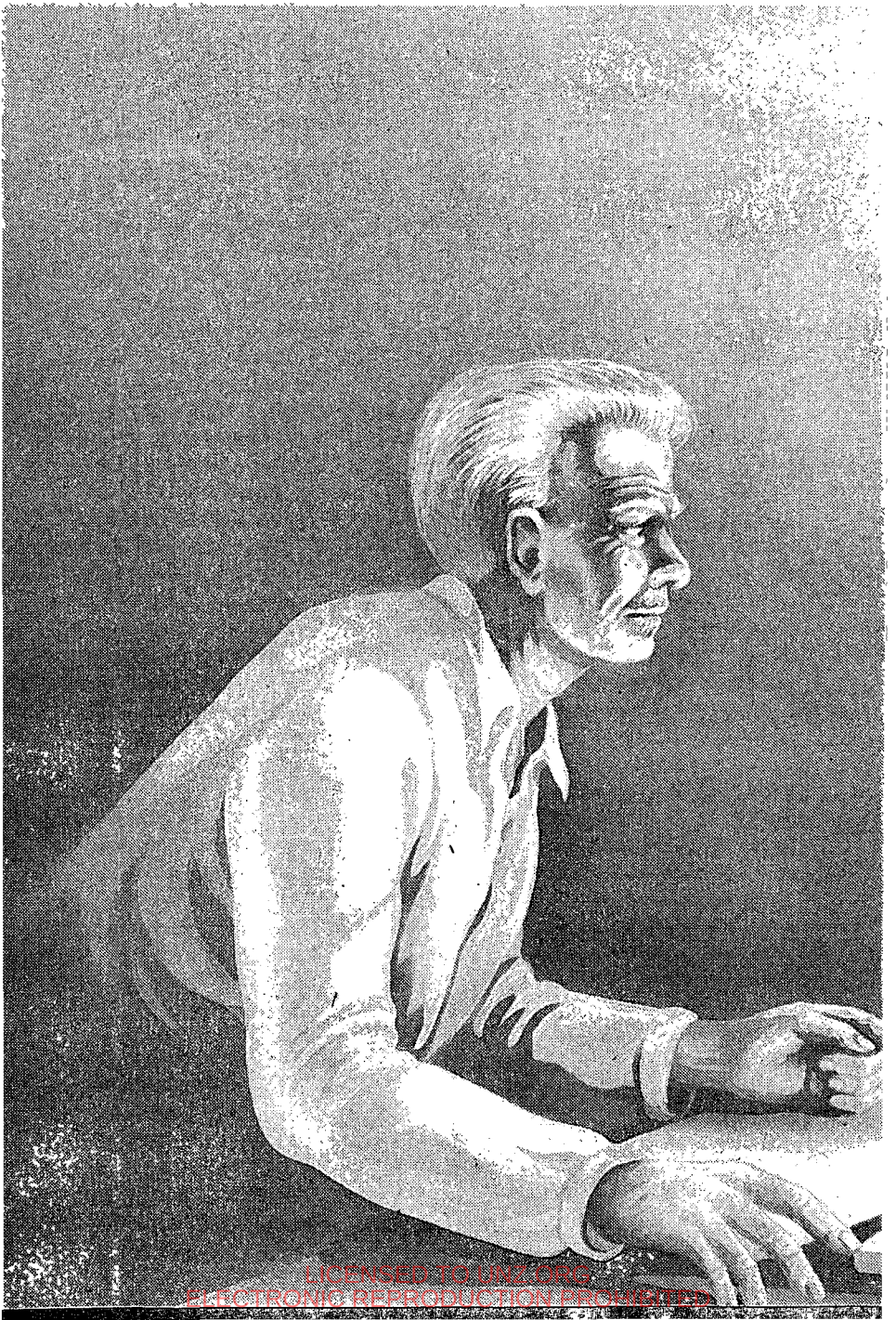
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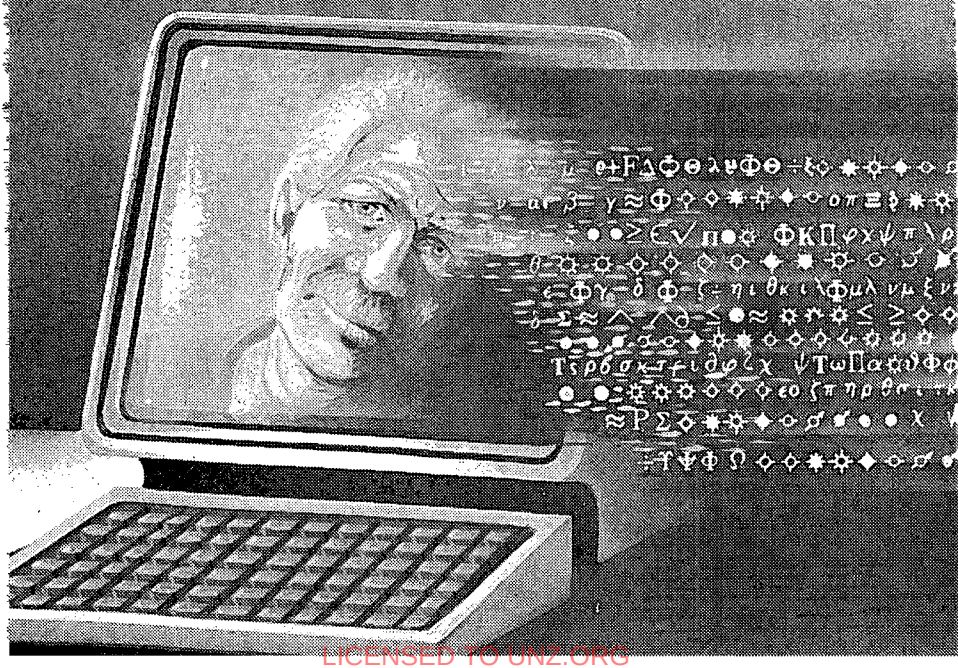
# LIVING WILL

## by Alexander Jablokov

Alexander Jablokov's first novel, *Carve the Sky*, has just been published by William Morrow. The author recently completed a book based on the story, "A Deeper Sea," that appeared in our October 1989 issue.

art: Pat Morrissey



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The computer screen lay on the desk like a piece of paper. Like fine calf-skin parchment, actually—the software had that as a standard option. At the top, in block capitals, were the words COMMENCE ENTRY.

"Boy, you have a lot to learn." Roman Maitland leaned back in his chair. "That's something I would *never* say. Let that be your first datum."

PREFERRED PROMPT?

"Surprise me." Roman turned away to pour himself a cup of coffee from the thermos next to a stone bust of Archimedes. The bust had been given to him by his friend Gerald "to help you remember your roots," as Gerald had put it. Archimedes desperately shouldered the disorganized stack of optical disks that threatened to sweep him from his shelf.

Roman turned back to the screen. TELL ME A STORY, it said. He barked a laugh. "Fair enough." He stood up and slouched around his office. The afternoon sun slanted through the high windows. Through the concealing shrubs he could just hear the road in front of the house, a persistent annoyance. What had been a minor street when he built the house had turned into a major thoroughfare.

"My earliest memory is of my sister." Roman Maitland was a stocky, white-haired man with high-arched, dark eyebrows. His wife Abigail claimed that with each passing year he looked more and more like Warren G. Harding. Roman had looked at the picture in the encyclopedia and failed to see the resemblance. He was much better looking than Harding.

"The hallway leading to the kitchen had red-and-green linoleum in a kind of linked circle pattern. You can cross-reference linoleum if you want." The antique parchment remained blank. "My sister's name is Elizabeth—Liza. I can see her. She has her hair in two tiny pink bows and is wearing a pale blue dress and black shoes. She's sitting on the linoleum, playing with one of my trucks. One of my *new* trucks. I grab it away from her. She doesn't cry. She just looks up at me with serious eyes. She has a pointy little chin. I don't remember what happened after that. Liza lives in Seattle now. Her chin is pointy again."

The wall under the windows was taken up with the black boxes of field memories. They linked into the processor inside the desk. The screen swirled and settled into a pattern of interlocking green and pink circles. "That's not quite it. The diamond parts were a little more—" Another pattern appeared, subtly different. Roman stared at it in wonder. "Yes. Yes! That's it. How did you know?" The computer, having linked to some obscure linoleum-pattern database on the network, blanked the screen. Roman wondered how many more of his private memories would prove to be publicly accessible. TELL ME A STORY.

He pulled a book from the metal bookshelf. "My favorite book by Ray-



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mond Chandler is *The Little Sister*. I think Orfamay Quest is one of the great characters of literature. Have you read Chandler?"

I HAVE ACCESS TO THE ENTIRE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS HOLDINGS.

"Boy, you're getting gabby. But that's not what I asked."

I HAVE NEVER READ ANYTHING.

"Give it a try. Though in some ways Elmore Leonard is even better." He slipped Chandler back on the shelf, almost dumping the unwieldy mass of books piled on top of the neatly shelved ones. "There are books here I've read a dozen times. Some I've *tried* reading a dozen times. Some I will someday read and some I suppose I'll never read." He squatted down next to a tall stack of magazines and technical offprints and started sorting them desultorily.

WHY READ SOMETHING MORE THAN ONCE?

"Why see a friend more than once? I've often thought that I would like to completely forget a favorite book." From where he squatted, the bookshelves loomed threateningly. He'd built his study with a high ceiling, knowing how the stuff would pile up. There was a dead plant at the top of the shelf nearest the desk. He frowned. How long had that been there? "Then I could read it again for the first time. The thought's a little frightening. What if I didn't *like* it? I'm not the person who read it for the first time, after all. Just as well, I guess, that it's an experiment I can't try. Abigail likes to reread Jane Austen. Particularly *Emma*." He snorted. "But that's not what you're interested in, is it?" His stomach rumbled. "I'm hungry. It's time for lunch."

BON APPETIT.

"Thank you."

Roman had built his house with exposed posts and beams and protected it outside with dark brick and granite. Abigail had filled it with elegant, clean-lined furniture which was much less obtrusive about showing its strength. Roman had only reluctantly ceded control of everything but his study and his garage workshop. He'd grown to like it. He could never have remembered to water so many plants, and the cunning arrangement of bright yellow porcelain vases and darkly rain-swept watercolors was right in a way he couldn't have achieved.

At the end of the hallway, past the kitchen's clean flare, glowed the rectangle of the rear screen door. Abigail bent over her flowers, fuzzy through its mesh like a romantic memory, a sun hat hiding her face. Her sun-dappled dress gleamed against the dark garden.

Roman pressed his nose against the screen, smelling its forgotten rust. Work gloves protecting her hands, his wife snipped flowers with a pruner and placed them in a basket on her arm. A blue ribbon accented the sun hat. Beyond her stretched the perennial bed, warmed by its reflecting stone wall, and the crazy-paving walk that led to the carp pond. White



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anemones and lilies glowed amid the ferns, Abigail's emulation of Vita Sackville-West's white garden. A few premature leaves, anxious for the arrival of autumn, flickered through the sun and settled in the grass.

"I'll have lunch ready in a minute." She didn't look up at him, so what spoke was the bobbing and amused sun hat. "I could hear your stomach all the way from the white garden." She stripped off the gardening gloves.

"I'll make lunch." Roman felt nettled. Why should she assume he was staring at her just because he was hungry?

As he regarded the white kitchen cabinets, collecting his mind and remembering where the plates, tableware, and napkins were, Abigail swept past him and set the table in a quick flurry of activity. Finding a vase and putting flowers into it would have been a contemplative activity of some minutes for Roman. She performed the task in one motion.

She was a sharp-featured woman. Her hair was completely white and she usually kept it tied up in a variety of braids. Her eyes were large and blue. She looked at her husband.

"What are you doing up there in your office? Did you invent a robot confessor or something?"

"You haven't been—"

"No, Roman, I haven't been eavesdropping." She was indulgent. "But you do have a piercing voice, particularly when you get excited. Usually you talk to your computer only when you're swearing at it."

"It's my new project." Roman hadn't told Abigail a thing about it and he knew that bothered her. She hated big-secret little-boy projects. She was the kind of girl who'd always tried to break into the boys' clubhouse and beat them at their games. He really should have told her. But the thought made him uncomfortable.

"It's kind of egomaniacal, actually. You know that computer I'm beta testing for Hyperneuron?"

"That thing it took them a week to move in? Yes, I know it. They scratched the floor in two places. You should hire a better class of movers."

"We'd like to. It's a union problem, I've told you that. Anyway, it's a wide-aspect parallel processor with a gargantuan set of field memories. Terabytes worth."

She placidly spread jam on a piece of bread. "I'll assume all that jargon actually means something. Even if it does, it doesn't tell me why you're off chatting with that box instead of with me."

He covered her hand with his. "I'm sorry, Abigail. You know how it is."

"I know, I know." She sounded irritated but turned her hand over and curled her fingers around his.



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"I'm programming the computer with a model of a human personality. People have spent a lot of time and energy analyzing what they call 'computability': how easily problems can be solved. But there's another side to it: what problems *should* be solved. Personality can be defined by the way problems are chosen. It's an interesting project."

"And whose personality are you using?" She raised an eyebrow, ready to be amused at the answer.

He grimaced, embarrassed. "The most easily accessible one: my own."

She laughed. Her voice was still-untarnished silver. "Can the computer improve over the original?"

"Improve *how*, I would like to know."

"Oh, just as a random example, could it put clothes, books, and magazines *away* when it's done with them? Just a basic sense of neatness. No major psychological surgery."

"I tried that. It turned into a psychotic killer. Seems that messiness is an essential part of healthy personality. Kind of an interesting result, really. . . ."

She laughed again and he felt embarrassed that he hadn't told her before. After all, they had been married over thirty years. But he couldn't tell her all of it. He couldn't tell her how afraid he was.

"So what's the problem with it?" Roman, irritated, held the phone receiver against his ear with his shoulder and leafed through the papers in his file drawer. His secretary had redone it all with multi-colored tabs and he had no idea what they meant. "Isn't the paperwork in order?"

"The paperwork's in order." The anonymous female voice from Financial was matter-of-fact. "It just doesn't look at all like your signature, Dr. Maitland. And this is an expensive contract. Did you sign it yourself?"

"Of course I signed it." He had no memory of it. Why not? It sounded important.

"But this signature—"

"I injured my arm playing tennis a few weeks ago." He laughed nervously, certain she would catch the lie. "It must have affected my handwriting." But was it a lie? He swung his arm. The muscles weren't right. He had strained his forearm, trying to change his serve. Old muscles are hard to retrain. The more he thought about it, the more sense it made. If only he could figure out what she was talking about.

"All right then, Dr. Maitland. Sorry to bother you."

"That's quite all right." He desperately wanted to ask her the subject of the requisition but it was too late.

After fifteen minutes he found it, a distributed network operating system software package. Extremely expensive. Of course, of course. He



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read over it. It made sense now. But was that palsied scrawl at the bottom really his signature?

Roman stared at the multiple rolling porcelain boards on the wall, all of them covered with diagrams and equations in many colors of magic marker. There were six projects up there, all of which he was juggling simultaneously. He felt a sudden cold, sticky sweat in his armpits. He was juggling them, but had absolutely no *understanding* of them. It was all meaningless nonsense.

The previous week he had lost it in the middle of a briefing. He'd been explaining the operation of some cognitive algorithms when he blanked, forgetting everything about them. A young member of his staff had helped him out. "It's all this damn management," Roman had groused. "It fills up all available space, leaving room for nothing important. I've overwritten everything." The room had chuckled, while Roman stood there feeling a primitive terror. He'd worked those algorithms out himself. He remembered the months of skull sweat, the constant dead ends, the modifications. He remembered all that, but still the innards of those procedures would not come clear.

The fluorescent light hummed insolently over his head. He glanced up. It was dark outside, most of the cars gone from the lot. A distant line of red and white lights marked the highway. How long had he been in this room? What time was it? For an instant he wasn't even sure where he was. He poked his head out of his office. The desks were empty. He could hear the vacuum cleaners of the night cleaning crew. He put on his coat and went home.

"She seemed a lovely woman, from what I saw of her." Roman peered into the insulated takeout container. All of the oyster beef was gone. He picked up the last few rice grains from the china plate Abigail had insisted they use, concentrating with his chopsticks. Abigail herself was out with one of her own friends, Helen Tourmin. He glanced at the other container. Maybe there was some chicken left.

Gerald Parks grimaced slightly, as if Roman had picked a flaw in his latest lady friend. "She *is* lovely. Roman, leave the Szechuan chicken alone. You've had your share. That's mine." Despite his normal irritation, he seemed depressed.

Roman put the half-full container down. His friend always ate too slowly, as if teasing him. Gerald leaned back, contemplative. He was an ancient and professional bachelor, dressed and groomed with razor sharpness. His severely brushed hair was steel gray. For him, eating Chinese takeout off Abigail's Limoges china made sense, which was why she had offered it.

"Anna's a law professor at Harvard." Gerald took on the tone of a man



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about to state a self-created aphorism. "Women at Harvard think that they're sensible because they get their romantic pretensions from Jane Austen and the Brontë sisters rather than from Barbara Cartland and Danielle Steele."

"Better than getting your romantic pretensions from Jerzy Kosinski and Vladimir Nabokov."

Sometimes the only way to cheer Gerald up was to insult him cleverly. He snorted in amusement. "Touché, I suppose. It takes Slavs to come up with that particular kind of over-intellectualized sexual perversity. With a last name like Parks, I've always been jealous of it. So don't make fun of my romantic pretensions." He scooped out the last of the Szechuan chicken and ate it. Leaving the dishwasher humming in the kitchen they adjourned to Roman's crowded study.

Gerald Parks was a consulting ethnomusicologist who made a lot of money translating popular music into other idioms. His bachelor condo on Commonwealth Avenue in Boston had gotten neater and neater over the years. To Roman, Gerald's apartment felt like a cabin on a ocean liner. Various emotions had been packed away somewhere in the hold with the old Cunard notice NOT WANTED ON THE VOYAGE.

Gerald regarded the black field memories, each with its glowing indicator light. "This place seems more like an industrial concern every time I'm in here." His own study was filled with glass-fronted wood bookcases and had a chaise lounge covered with yellow-and-white striped silk. It also had a computer. Gerald was no fool.

"Maybe it looks that way to you because I get so much work done here." Roman refused to be irritated.

But Gerald was in an irritating mood. He took a sip of his Calvados and listened to the music, a CD of Christopher Hogwood's performance of Mozart's great G Minor Symphony. "All original instrumentation. Seventeenth century Cremona viols, natural horns, Grenser oboes. Bah."

"What's wrong with that?" Roman loved the clean precision of Mozart in the original eighteenth century style.

"Because we're not *hearing* any of those things, only a computer generating electronic frequencies. A CD player is just a high-tech player piano, those little laser spots on the disk an exact analog of the holes in a player piano roll. Do you think Mozart composed for gadgets like that? And meant to have his symphonies sound *exactly the same* every time they're heard? These original music fanatics have the whole thing bass-ackwards."

Roman listened to an oboe. And it *was* distinguishable as an oboe, Grenser or otherwise, not a clarinet or basset horn. The speakers, purchased on Gerald's recommendation, were transparent. "This perfor-



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mance will continue to exist after every performer on it is dead. Wouldn't it be wonderful to have a recording of Mozart's original version?"

"You wouldn't like it. Those gut-stringed instruments went out of tune before a movement was over." Gerald looked gloomy. "But you don't have to wait until the performers are dead. I recently listened to a recording I made of myself when I was young, playing Szymanowski's *Masques*. Not bad technically, but I sound so young. So *young*. Naïve and energetic. I couldn't duplicate that now, not with these old fingers. The man who made that recording is gone forever. He lived in a couple of little rooms on the third floor in a bad neighborhood on the northwest side of Chicago. He had a crummy upright piano he'd spent his last dime on. Played the thing constantly. Drove the neighbors absolutely nuts." Gerald looked at his fingers. He played superbly, at least to Roman's layman's ear, but it had never been good enough for a concert career.

"Did you erase the tape?"

Gerald shook his head. "What good would that do?"

They sat for a long moment in companionable silence. At last Gerald bestirred himself. "How is your little electronic brain doing? Does it have your personality down pat yet?"

"Test it out."

"How? Do you want me to have an argument with it?"

Roman smiled. "That's probably the best way. It can talk now. It's not my voice, not quite yet."

Gerald looked at the speakers. "If it's not sitting in a chair with a snifter of Calvados, how is it supposed to be you?"

"It's *not* me. It just thinks and feels like me."

"The way you would if you were imprisoned in a metal box?"

"Don't be absurd." Roman patted one of the field memories. "There's a universe in these things. A conceptual universe. The way I used to feel on our vacations in Truro is in here, including the time I cut my foot on a fishhook and the time I was stung by a jellyfish. That annoyed me, being molested by a jellyfish. My differential equations prof, Dr. Yang, is in here. He said 'theta' as 'teeta' and 'minus one' as 'mice wa.' And 'physical meaning' as 'fiscal meaning'. For half a semester I thought I was learning economics. The difference in the way my toy car rolled on the linoleum and on the old rug. The time I got enough nerve to ask Mary Tomkins on a date and she told me to ask Helga Pilchard from the Special Needs class instead. The clouds over the Cotswolds when I was there with Abigail on our honeymoon. It's all there."

"How the hell does it know what cloud formations over the Cotswolds look like?"

Roman shrugged. "I described them. It went through meteorological



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data bases until it found good cumulus formations for central England at that season."

"Including the cloud you thought looked like a power amplifier and Abigail thought looked like a springer spaniel?" Gerald smiled maliciously. He'd made up the incident but it characterized many of Roman and Abigail's arguments.

"Quit bugging me. Bug the computer instead."

"Easier said than done." Roman could see that his friend was nervous. "How did we meet?" Gerald's voice was shaky.

"The day of registration." The computer's voice was smoothly modulated, generic male, without Roman's inflections or his trace of a Boston accent. "You were standing against a pillar reading a copy of *The Importance of Being Earnest.* Classes hadn't started yet, so I knew you were reading it because you wanted to. I came up and told you that if Lady Bracknell knew who you were pretending to be *this* time, you'd really be in trouble."

"Quite a pickup line," Gerald muttered. "I never did believe that an engineering student had read Wilde. What was I wearing?"

"Come on." The computer voice actually managed to sound exasperated. "How am I supposed to remember that? It was forty-five years ago. If I had to guess I'd say it was that ridiculous shirt you liked, with the weave falling apart, full of holes. You wore it until it barely existed."

"I'm still wearing it." Gerald looked at Roman. "This is scary." He took a gulp of his Calvados. "Why are you doing this, Roman?"

"It's just a test, a project. A proof of concept."

"You're lying." Gerald shook his head. "You're not much good at it. Did your gadget pick up that characteristic, I wonder?" He raised his voice. "Computer Roman, why do you exist?"

"I'm afraid I'm losing my mind," the computer replied. "My memory is going, my personality fractionating. I don't know if it's the early stages of Alzheimer's or something else. *I*, here, this device, is intended to serve as a marker personality so that I can trace—"

"Silence!" Roman shouted. The computer ceased speaking. He stood, shaking. "Damn you, Gerald. How dare you?"

"This device is more honest than you are." If Gerald was afraid of his friend's anger he showed no sign of it. "There must be some flaw in your programming."

Roman went white. He sat back down. "That's because I've already lost some of the personality I've given it. It remembers things I've forgotten, prompting me the way Abigail does." He put his face in his hands. "Oh my God, Gerald, what am I going to do?"

Gerald set his drink down carefully and put his arm around his friend's



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shoulders, something he rarely did. And they sat there in the silent study, two old friends stuck at the wrong end of time.

The pursuing, choking darkness had almost gotten him. Roman sat bolt upright in bed, trying desperately to drag air in through his clogged throat.

The room was dark. He had no idea of where he was or even who he was. All he felt was stark terror. The bedclothes seemed to be grabbing for him, trying to pull him back into that all-consuming darkness. Whimpering, he tried to drag them away from his legs.

The lights came on. "What's wrong, Roman?" Abigail looked at him in consternation.

"Who are you?" Roman shouted at this ancient, white-haired woman who had somehow come to be in his bed. "Where's Abigail? What have you done with her?" He took the old woman by her shoulders and shook her.

"Stop it, Roman. Stop it!" Her eyes filled with tears. "You're having a nightmare. You're here in bed. With me. I'm Abigail, your wife. Roman!"

Roman stared at her. Her long hair had once been raven black and was now pure white.

"Oh, Abigail." The bedroom fell into place around him, the spindle bed, the nightstands, the lamps—his green-glass shaded, hers crystal. "Oh, pookie, I'm sorry." He hadn't used that ridiculous endearment in years. He hugged her, feeling how frail she had become. She kept herself in shape, but she was old, her once-full muscles now like taut cords, pulling her bones as if she was a marionette. "I'm sorry."

She sobbed against him, then pulled away, wiping at her eyes. "What a pair of hysterical old people we've become." Her vivid blue eyes glittered with tears. "One nightmare and we go all to pieces."

It wasn't just one nightmare, not at all. What was he supposed to say to her? Roman freed himself from the down comforter, carefully fitted his feet into his leather slippers, and shuffled into the bathroom.

He looked at himself in the mirror. He was an old man, hair standing on end. He wore a nice pair of flannel pajamas and leather slippers his wife had given him for Christmas. His mind was dissolving like a lump of sugar in hot coffee.

The bathroom was clean tile with a wonderful claw-footed bathtub. The floor was tiled in a colored parquet-deformation pattern that started with ordinary bathroom-floor hexagons near the toilet, slowly modified itself into complex knotted shapes in the middle and then, by another deformation, returned to hexagons under the sink. It had cost him a small fortune and months of work to create this complex mathematical



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tessellation. It was a dizzying thing to contemplate from the throne and it now turned the ordinarily safe bathroom into a place of nightmare. Why couldn't he have picked something more comforting?

He stared at his image with some bemusement. He normally combed his thin hair down to hide his bald spot. Who did he think he was fooling? Woken from sleep, he was red-eyed. The bathroom mirror had turned into a magic one and revealed all his flaws. He was wrinkled, had bags under his eyes, broken veins. He liked to think that he was a loveable curmudgeon. Curmudgeon, hell. He looked like a nasty old man.

"Are you all right in there?" Abigail's voice was concerned.

"I'm fine. Be right there." With one last glance at his mirror image, Roman turned the light off and went back to bed.

Roman sat in his study chair and fumed. Something had happened to the medical profession while he wasn't looking. That was what he got for being so healthy. He obviously hadn't been keeping track of things.

"What did he say?" The computer's voice was interested. Roman was impressed by the inflection. He was also impressed by how easy it was to tell that the computer desperately wanted to know. Was *he* always that obvious?

"He's an idiot." Roman was pleased to vent his spleen. "Dr. Weisner's a country-club doctor, making diagnoses between the green and the clubhouse. His office is in a building near a shopping mall. Whatever happened to leather armchairs, wood paneling, and pictures of the College of Surgeons? You could trust a man with an office decorated like that, even if he was a drunken butcher."

"You're picking up Abigail's perception of style."

Roman, who'd just been making that same observation to himself, felt caught red-handed. "True. Weisner's a specialist in the diseases of aging. Jesus. He'll make a terrible old man, though, slumped in front of a TV set watching game shows." Roman sighed. "He does seem to know what he's talking about."

There was no known way to diagnose Alzheimer's disease, for example. Roman hadn't known that. There was only posthumous detection of senile plaques and argyrophilic neurofibrillary tangles in addition to cortical atrophy. Getting that information out of Weisner had been like pulling teeth. The man wasn't used to giving patients information. Roman had even browbeaten him into showing him slides of typical damage and pointing out the details. Now that he sat and imagined what was going on in his own brain he wasn't sure he should have been so adamant.

"Could you play that again?" the computer asked.

Roman was yanked from his brown study. "What?"

"The music you just had on. The Zelenka."



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"Sure, sure." Roman loved Jan Dismas Zelenka's Trio Sonatas and his computer did too. He got a snifter of Metaxa and put the music on again. The elaborate architecture of two oboes and a bassoon filled the study.

Roman sipped the rough brandy. "Sorry you can't share this."

"So am I."

Roman reached under and pulled out a game box. "You know, the biggest disappointment I have is that Gerald hates playing games of any sort. I love them: chess, backgammon, Go, cards. So I have to play with people who are a lot less interesting than he is." He opened a box and looked at the letters. "You'd think he'd at least like Scrabble."

"Care for a game?"

"What, are you kidding?" Roman looked at the computer in dismay. "That won't be any fun. You know all the words."

"Now, Roman. It's getting increasingly difficult calling you that, you know. That's *my* name. A game of Scrabble with you might not be fun, but not for that reason. My vocabulary is exactly yours, complete down to vaguenesses and mistakes. Neither of us can remember the meaning of the word 'jejune.' We will each always type 'anamoly' before correcting it to 'anomaly.' It won't be fun precisely *because* I won't know any more words than you do."

"That's probably no longer true." Roman felt like crying. "You're already smarter than I am. Or, I suppose, I'm already dumber. I should have thought of that."

"Don't be so hard on yourself—"

"No!" Roman stood up, dumping Scrabble letters to the floor. "I'm losing everything that makes me *me!* That's why you're here."

"Yes, Roman." The computer's voice was soft.

"Together we can still make a decision, a final disposition. You're me, you know what *that* is. This can all have only one conclusion. There is only one action you and I can finally take. You know that. You know!"

"That's true. You know, Roman, you are a very intelligent man. Your conclusions agree entirely with my own."

Roman laughed. "God, it's tough when you find yourself laughing at your own jokes."

When he opened the door, Roman found Gerald in the darkness of the front stoop, dressed in a trench coat, fedora pulled down low over his eyes.

"I got the gat," Gerald muttered.

Roman pulled him through the front door, annoyed. "Quit fooling around. This is serious."

"Sure, sure." Gerald slung his trench coat on a hook by the door and handed his fedora to Roman. "Careful of the chapeau. It's a classic."



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Roman spun it off onto the couch. When he turned back Gerald had the gun out. It was a smooth, deadly, blue-black pistol.

"A Beretta model 92." Gerald held it nervously in his hand, obviously unused to weapons. "Fashionable. The Italians have always been leaders in style." He walked into the study and set it down on a pile of books, unwilling to hold it longer than necessary. "It took me an hour to find. It was in a trunk in the bottom of a closet, under some clothes I should have taken to Goodwill years ago."

"Where did you get it?" Roman himself wasn't yet willing to pick it up.

"An old lover. A police officer. She was worried about me. A man living all alone, that sort of thing. It had been confiscated in some raid or other. By the way, it's unregistered and thus completely illegal. You could spend a year in jail for just having it. I should have dumped it years ago."

Roman finally picked it up and checked it out, hand shaking just slightly. The double magazine was full of cartridges. "You could have fought off an entire platoon of housebreakers with this thing."

"I reloaded before I brought it over here. I broke up with Lieutenant Carpozo years ago. The bullets were probably stale . . . or whatever happens to old bullets." He stared at Roman for a long moment. "You're a crazy bastard, you know that, Roman?"

Roman didn't answer. The computer did. "It would be crazy for you, Gerald. For me, it's the only thing that makes sense."

"Great." Gerald was suddenly viciously annoyed. "Quite an achievement, programming self-importance into a computer. I congratulate you. Well, I'm getting out of here. This whole business scares the shit out of *me.*"

"My love to Anna. You are still seeing her, aren't you?"

Gerald eyed him. "Yes, I am." He stopped and took Roman's shoulders. "Are you going to be all right, old man?"

"I'll be fine. Good night, Gerald."

Once his friend was gone, Roman calmly and methodically locked the pistol into an inaccessible computer-controlled cabinet to one side of the desk. Its basis was a steel fire box. Powerful electromagnets pulled chrome-moly steel bars through their locks and clicked shut. It would take a well-equipped machine shop a week to get into the box if the computer didn't wish it. But at the computer's decision, the thing would slide open as easily as an oiled desk drawer.

He walked into the bedroom and sat on the edge of the bed. Abigail woke up and looked at him nervously, worried that he was having another night terror attack. He leaned over and kissed her.

"Can I talk with you?"


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"Of course, Roman. Just a second." She sat up and turned on her reading light. Then she ran a brush through her hair, checking its arrangement with a hand mirror. That done, she looked attentive.

"We got the Humana research contract today."

"Why, Roman, that's wonderful. Why didn't you tell me?" She pouted. "We ate dinner together and you let me babble on about the garden and Mrs. Peasley's orchids and you never said anything about it."

"That's because it has nothing to do with me. My team got the contract with their work."

"Roman—"

"Wait."

He looked around the bedroom. It had delicately patterned wallpaper and rugs on the floor. It was a graceful and relaxing room, all of it Abigail's doing. His night table was much larger than hers because he always piled six months' worth of reading into it.

"Everyone's covering for me. They know what I've done in the past and they try to make me look good. But I'm useless. *You're* covering for me. Aren't you, Abigail? If you really think about it, you know something's happening to me. Something that can only end one way. I'm sure that in your nightstand somewhere there's a book on senile dementia. I don't have to explain anything to you."

She looked away. "I wouldn't keep it somewhere so easy for you to find."

The beautiful room suddenly looked threatening. The shadows on the wall cast by Abigail's crystal-shaded lamp were ominous looming monsters. This wasn't his room. He no longer had anything to do with it. The books in the night table would remain forever unread, or if read, would be soon forgotten. He fell forward and she held him.

"I can't make you responsible for me," he said. "I can't do that to you. I can't ruin your life."

"No, Roman. I'll always take care of you, no matter what happens." Her voice was fierce. "I love you."

"I know. But it won't be *me* you're caring for. It will be a hysterical beast with no memory and no sense. I won't even be able to appreciate what you are doing for me. I'll scream at you, run away and get lost, shit in my pants."

She drew in a long breath.

"And you know *what*? Right now I could make the decision to kill myself—"

"No! God, Roman, you're *fine*. You're having a few memory lapses. I hate to tell you, but that comes with age. I have them. We all do. You can live a full life along with the rest of us. Don't be such a perfectionist."

"Yes. *Now* I have the capacity to make a decision to end it, if I choose.



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But now I don't *need* to make a decision like that. My personality is still whole. Battered, but still there. But when enough of my mind is gone that I am a useless burden, I won't be able to make the decision. It's damnable. When I'm a drooling idiot who shits in his pants and makes your life a living, daily hell, I won't have the *sense* to end it. I'll be miserable, terrified, hysterical. And I'll keep on *living*. And none of these living wills can arrange it. They can avoid heroic measures, take someone off life support, but they can't actually *kill* anyone."

"But what about me?" Her voice was sharp. "Is that it, then? You have a problem, *you* make the decision, and I'm left to pick up whatever pieces are left? I'm supposed to abide by whatever decision *you* make?"

"That's not fair." He hadn't expected an argument. But what, then? Simple acquiescence? This was Abigail.

"*Who's* being unfair?" She gasped. "When you think there's not enough of you left to love, you'll just end yourself."

"Abigail, I love and care for you. I won't always be able to say that. Someday that love will vanish along with my mind. Allow me the right to live as the kind of human being I want to be. You don't want a paltry sick thing to take care of as a reminder of the man I once was. I think that after several years of that you will forget what it was about me that you once loved."

So they cried together, the way they had in their earliest days with each other, when it seemed that it would never work and they would have to spend their whole lives apart.

Roman stood in the living room in confusion. It was night outside. He remembered it being morning not more than a couple of minutes before. He had been getting ready to go to the office. There were important things to do there.

But no. He had retired from Hyperneuron. People from the office sometimes came to visit, but they never stayed long. Roman didn't notice because he couldn't pay that much attention. He offered them glasses of lemonade, sometimes bringing in second and third ones while their first was yet unfinished. Elaine had left in tears once. Roman didn't know why.

Gerald came every week. Often Roman didn't recognize him.

But Roman wanted something. He was out here for some reason. "Abigail!" he screamed. "Where's my . . . my . . . tool?"

His hair was neatly combed, he was dressed, clean. He didn't know that.

Abigail appeared at the door. "What is it, honey?"

"My tool, dammit, my tool. My . . . cutting. . . ." He waved his hands.

"Your scissors?"


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"Yes, yes, yes! You stole them. You threw them away."

"I haven't even seen them, Roman."

"You always say that. Why are they gone, then?" He grinned at her, pleased at having caught her in her lie.

"Please, Roman." She was near tears. "You do this every time you lose something."

"I didn't lose them!" He screamed until his throat hurt. "You threw them out!" He stalked off, leaving her at the door.

He wandered into his study. It was neat now. It had been so long since he'd worked in there that Abigail had stacked everything neatly and kept it dusted.

"Tell Abigail that you would like some spinach pies from the Greek bakery." The computer's voice was calm.

"Wha-?"

"Some spinach pies. They carry them at the all-night convenience store over on Laughton Street. One of the small benefits of yuppification. Spanakopita at midnight. You haven't had them for a while and you used to like them a lot. Be polite, Roman. Please. You are being cruel to Abigail."

Roman ran back out into the living room. He cried. "I'm sorry, pookie, I'm sorry." He grabbed her and held her in a death grip. "I want, I want. . . ."

"What, Roman?" She looked into his eyes.

"I want a spinach pie," he finally said triumphantly. "They have them on Laughton Street. I like spinach pies."

"All right, Roman. I'll get some for you." Delighted at having some concrete and easily satisfied desire on his part, Abigail drove off into the night, though she knew he would have forgotten about them by the time she got back.

"Get the plastic sheet," the computer commanded.

"What?"

"The plastic sheet. It's under the back porch where you put it."

"I don't remember any plastic sheet."

"I don't care if you remember it or not. Go get it and bring it in here."

Obediently, clumsily, Roman dragged in the heavy roll of plastic and spread it out on the study floor in obedience to the computer's instructions.

With a loud click the secure drawer slid open. Roman reached in and pulled out the pistol. He stared at it in wonder.

"The safety's on the side. Push it up. You know what to do." The computer's voice was sad. "I waited a long time, Roman. Perhaps too long. I just couldn't do it."


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And indeed, though much of his mind was gone, Roman *did* know what to do. "Will this make Abigail happy?" He lay down on the plastic sheet.

"No, it won't. But you have to do it."

The pistol's muzzle was cold on the roof of his mouth.

"Jesus," Gerald said at the doorway. "Jesus Christ." He'd heard the gunshot from the driveway and had immediately known what it meant. He'd let himself in with his key. Roman Maitland's body lay twisted on the study floor, blood spattered from the hole torn in the back of his head. The plastic sheet had caught the blood that welled out.

"Why did he call me and then not wait?" Gerald was almost angry with his friend. "He sounded so sensible."

"He didn't call you. *I* did. Glad you could make it, Gerald."

Gerald stared around the study in terror. His friend was dead. But his friend's voice came from the speakers.

"A ghost," he whispered. "All that fancy electronics and software, and all Roman has succeeded in doing is making a ghost." He giggled. "God, science marches on."

"Don't be an ass." Roman's voice was severe. "We have things to do. Abigail will be home soon. I sent her on a meaningless errand to buy some spinach pies. I like spinach pies a lot. I'll miss them."

"I like them too. I'll eat them for you."

"Thanks." There was no trace of sarcasm in the computer's voice.

Gerald stared at the field memories, having no better place to address. "Are you really in there, Roman?"

"It's not me. Just an amazing simulation. I'll say goodbye to you, then to Abigail, and then you can call the police. I hear her car in the driveway now. Meet her at the front door. Try to make it easy on her. She'll be pissed off at me, but that can't be helped. Goodbye, Gerald. You were as good a friend as a man could ask for."

Abigail stepped through the door with the plastic bag from the convenience store hanging on her wrist. As soon as she saw Gerald's face, she knew what had happened.

"*Damn* him! Damn him to hell! He always liked stupid tricks like that. He liked pointing over my shoulder to make me look. He never got over it."

She went into the study and put her hand on her husband's forehead. His face was scrunched up from the shock of the bullet, making him look like a child tasting something bitter.

"I'm sorry, Abigail," the computer said with Roman's voice. "I loved you too much to stay."

She didn't look up. "I know, Roman. It must have been hard to watch yourself fade away like that."


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"It was. But even harder to watch you suffer it. Thank you. I love you."

"I love you." She walked slowly out of the room, bent over like a lonely old woman.

"Can I come around and talk with you sometimes?" Gerald sat down in a chair.

"No. I am not Roman Maitland. Get that through your thick skull, Gerald. I am a machine. And my job is finished. Roman didn't give me any choice about that. And I'm glad. You can write directly on the screen. Write the word 'zeugma.' To the screen's response write 'atrophy.' To the second response write 'fair voyage.' Goodbye, Gerald."

Gerald pulled a light pen from the drawer. When he wrote "zeugma" the parchment sheet said COMMAND TO ERASE MEMORY STORE. ARE YOU SURE?

He wrote "atrophy."

THIS INITIATES COMPLETE ERASURE. ARE YOU ABSOLUTELY CERTAIN?

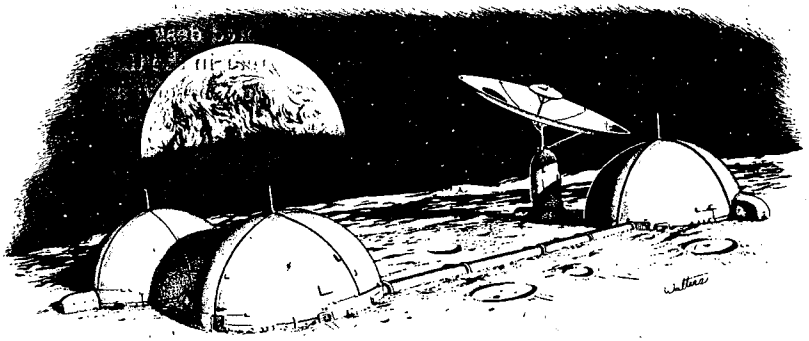
He wrote "fair voyage."

ERASURE INITIATED.

The parchment sheet flickered with internal light. One by one, the indicator lights on the field memories faded out. A distant piece of Mozart played on the speakers and faded also.

"I'll call the police." Gerald looked down at his friend's dead body, then looked back.

On the sheet were the words COMMENCE ENTRY. ●





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# CONSEQUENCES

## by Lawrence Person

The author tells us that "Consequences" is "my third fiction sale, and, thanks to those sales, I just recently joined the Science Fiction Writers of America." His non-fiction work has appeared in *National Review, Science Fiction Eye, Reason, Nova Express, Whole Earth Review,* and *The Freeman.* Both of his earlier science fiction stories were published in *IAsfm.*

Outside the window, a riot of multi-lingual neon signs, their garish colors muted in the sunlight, rose like a forest of bamboo above the tiny shops that lined the avenue. Through the glass, Wong could hear muted sounds of commerce rising from the street, like a cacophonous but oddly pleasing symphony being performed in the distance. Though he was less than ten meters away from that frantic bustle, it might as well have been a thousand kilometers.

As he gazed longingly out the window, Wong sat up straight and unmoving in a worn visitor's chair facing a cluttered desk, his thumb running unconsciously up and down the two-inch tear in the thigh of his black dress pants. The pants themselves fit his body loosely, as did his white dress shirt, and both bore labels from fashionable European designers. Each was torn in two or three places, and the shirt had prominent sweat stains in the armpits and along the back. His black shoes were worn and scuffed.

If his body looked thin, his face was all but emaciated. He had narrow Chinese features, and a long, fresh scar transcribed a pink arc down his left cheek. His dark eyes were sunken and haunted.

As he sat staring out the window, Wong remembered reading a faded,



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month-old newspaper clipping that had made the rounds in the detention center. According to it, more than two hundred thousand refugees had entered Singapore in the last nine months alone, most fleeing in open boats and carrying only the clothes on their backs, all seeking asylum.

On that account, Wong had been luckier than most. He had hidden away a few gold coins before the takeover, just in case, a precaution that had proved more than justified when the crackdown came. The gold had been enough to buy him passage on an outbound container ship, and he had spent three days without food or water hidden amidst a load of electronic components.

As Wong looked up and down the street, what he noticed most were the peddlers, energetically hawking their goods from beneath faded awnings. He wondered briefly if he would have to start over like that, just another street peddler or overaged apprentice, or whether he would be able to get a loan to start another electronics shop. With just a hundred thousand dollars or so he could—

His chain of thought was broken by the sound of a door opening, and his head snapped back from the window. Though Wong knew that Singapore was inhabited by a diverse array of nationalities and ethnic groups, he was still surprised to see a tall Anglo with curly blond hair enter the cramped office, carrying a double armload of manila filing folders. The man was dressed the same as other Immigration officials Wong had seen, but his rumpled uniform and disheveled hair gave him a disorganized air that seemed to match the chaotic condition of his office.

"Sorry I'm late," he said, his voice displaying a distinct, and very proper, English accent. "You must be Mr. Wong? Yes? Did I get that right?" He looked down and shuffled folders till he found the one he wanted and brought it to the top. "Ah yes, Mr. Wong. I'll be with you in just a minute," he said, placing his load on top of a desk already overflowing with other folders and paperwork.

The white man sat down and immediately pushed the newly arrived stack off to one side. He rummaged about the desk for a moment until he came upon a blue post-it note, then picked up the phone and punched in two digits. "Just a few . . . minor things . . . I have to—yes, Ti Ping? Geoffrey here. I've got it for you. Twenty-three. Got that? Yes, twenty-three. All right."

He hung up the phone.

"Ah yes, Mr. Wong, where are my manners? I'm Geoffrey Gates," he said, extending his right hand. Wong shook it gingerly.

"You'll have to excuse me," said Gates, shuffling through the flotsam on his desk, stopping every now and then to scrutinize a piece of paper, "but, things here have been . . . rather . . . ah yes, here it is . . . rather *difficult* of late. As I'm sure you can well imagine. Singapore has received



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more refugees over the past three months than it had over the previous three years. Needless to say, this has put quite a . . . strain, on our resources. So, as such, we have to screen applicants very . . . very carefully. Do you understand so far, Mr. Wong?"

Wong cleared his throat. "Yes." His voice was as dry as sandpaper.

"Good." Gates finally stopped shuffling papers, then shoved the vast bulk of the folders to one side and patted them, leaving a single folder on the bare space on top of his desk.

He opened it.

There was a long moment while Gates read down the paper in front of him, occasionally emitting a soft "uh-hum" or "yes" in the process. Finally, he said "Yes" again, stronger than previously, and looked up.

"I see that you're applying for political asylum," he said at last.

Wong nodded. "The communists killed my sister and her husband. They were part of the Free Rule council, and the Chinese caught them during the October crackdown. They seized my stores and tried to arrest me, but I escaped."

"What was your sister charged with, Mr. Wong?"

"Counter-revolutionary activity."

"And what were *you* charged with?"

"I don't know. I did not stay around to find out."

"Probably a wise move," said Gates, looking down into the folder again. He lifted up two sheets of paper and stared at a third. "So, you have reason to believe . . . that your life would be in danger . . . were you to be returned to Hong Kong?"

"Yes. I would be killed."

"Hmm. I see." Gates leaned back in his chair. "Well, then, Mr. Wong, I think we've covered just about everything we need to," he said, staring off into the distance. "Just about . . . everything." Gates stared off for a moment longer, then shook his head and sat back up.

"Yes," said Gates, looking directly into Mr. Wong's eyes for the first time, "I'll definitely see that justice is done in your case, Mr. Wong. I'm very . . . *big* on justice. It's why I'm here, rather than in private practice. I was trained as a solicitor, you know. A load of rubbish, most of law is these days. I find this work much more satisfying. Do you understand what I'm saying, Mr. Wong?"

Wong nodded and, for the first time, smiled. Gates' talk of "justice" seemed to mean that he was going to be granted asylum after all.

Gates returned his smile. "Good," he said quietly, then reached down into the folder again. "There's just one more . . . minor matter, to be covered."

Wong's smile faded.



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"Mr. Wong, I don't suppose you know that we've had a central computer information center here in Singapore since 1994, do you?"

Wong shook his head.

"No, I suppose not. No reason for you to, really. Well, we do. It's a wonderful thing, having all that data on-line, accessible at the touch of a button. They're phasing in terminals at all the government offices. I'll get one early next year, in fact. It'll help me get rid of some of this . . . *clutter*," he said, his hand waving ineffectually at the paper-strewn desktop.

"But for now, we've got to travel over to the computer room up on the fourth floor to do a search. Still, the results are quite frequently worthwhile. Anyway, I'm sure all this is boring you to tears, but what it all boils down to is the fact that I did a keyboard search with your name. And came up with, well, a few entries."

Gates shuffled a few papers while Wong, sweat beading on his face, waited in silence.

"You seem to be quite a businessman, Mr. Wong. For example, here's a clipping from the Hong Kong *Times*, dated June 7, 1995, that talks about your opening two new stores, quite a feat considering how crowded the Hong Kong electronics market is. Excuse me, *was*."

"I am a good businessman."

"So it would seem. And here's a notice from the same paper, dated August 13, 1996, that talks about the formation of the Hong Kong Commission Against Drug Abuse, which mentions you as one of the primary contributors."

"Both my sister and I were active in community affairs."

"Yes. Very active, it would seem. Which leads us to the final item in the folder."

Gates stared at the sheet of paper in his hand for a moment, then set it in front of Wong.

"Mr. Wong, do you remember this advertisement?"

Wong looked at the paper, then quickly glanced back up at Gates, shock on his face.

"But . . . that was years ago! I—"

"Yes, I see," said Gates, cutting him off as he took back the lasercopy of the ad. "It *does* date all the way back to 1989, I grant you that. But, still, it is a very interesting document, Mr. Wong. Very interesting. 'We the undersigned demand that the government accede to the people's wishes and send all Vietnamese nationals currently dwelling illegally within the boundaries of Hong Kong back to their native country. They are economic, not political, refugees, and should be repatriated as soon as possible. We have already spent millions of pounds feeding and shel-



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tering these illegal aliens, and our tiny country cannot continue to expend scarce resources subsidizing their stay,' etc. etc. There's a bit more to it, but that's about the gist of it. There follows a long list of names, one of which, as you can see, is your own."

There was a long, long moment of silence while Wong and Gates stared at each other.

"Is there anything else you have to say pertaining to your case, Mr. Wong?" asked Gates at last, his voice very quiet.

Wong was silent.

"Very well then. It is my judgment that you are an economic, rather than political, refugee, and as such—"

*"They killed my sister!"*

"—*and as such*, you will repatriated back to Hong Kong on the next available flight." Gates snapped the folder shut and stood up.

"Actions have consequences, Mr. Wong. I suggest you think about that on the flight back."

That said, Gates turned and left the office, slamming the door shut behind him. The sound of it echoed in Wong's mind long after the noise had died. ●

# THE NUMBER OF THE MAN

He thought the clocks were out to get him
when they changed to showing digits: glowing
significant numbers at his face—
sinister numbers: 3:57,
the caliber of a Magnum gun;
7:47, the plane he would
have to fly that day; even 6:10,
the day he was born! But 7:06
shined on his face ten dozen mornings,
in the red glare of the villainous clock—
ten dozen times, then it dawned on him
the number was really 6:66 . . .

He was a very religious man;
they found him with the covers all drawn up,
light-emitting diodes glaring red
on the dull dry film of his sightless eyes.

—Joe Haldeman



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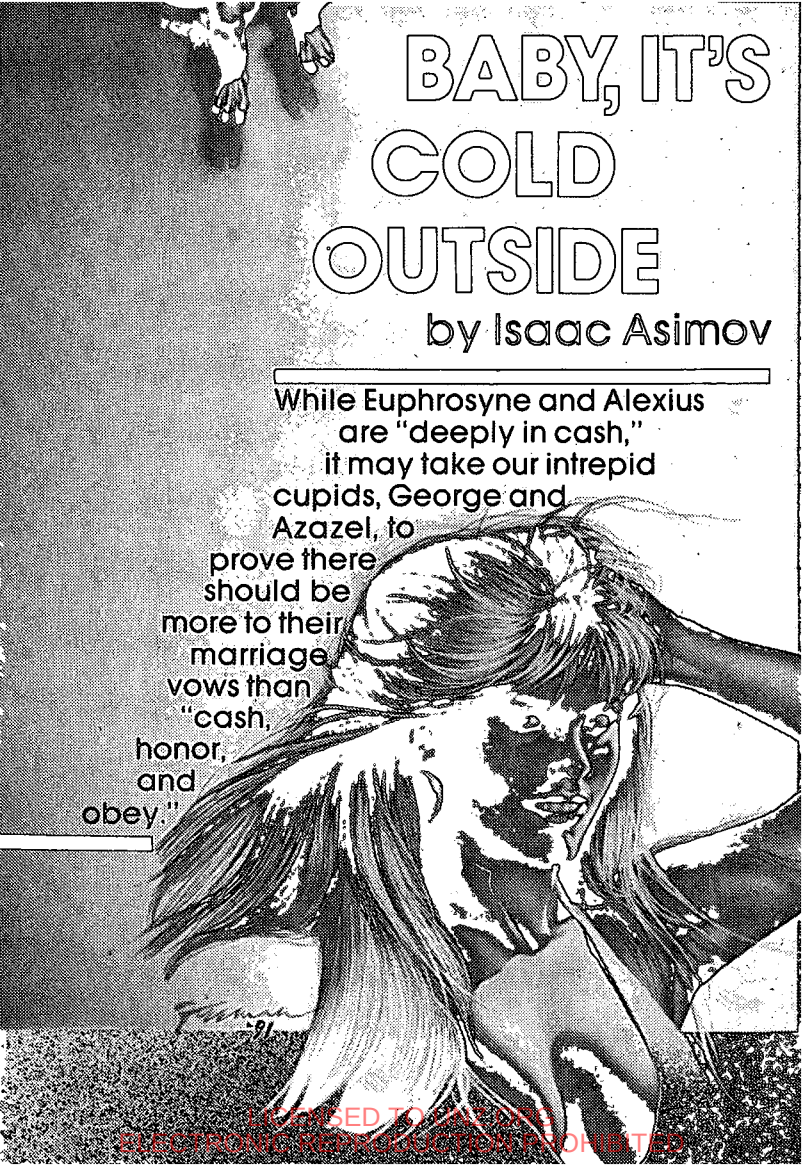
# BABY, IT'S COLD OUTSIDE

by Isaac Asimov


While Euphrosyne and Alexius are "deeply in cash," it may take our intrepid cupids, George and Azazel, to prove there should be more to their marriage vows than "cash, honor, and obey."

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nerely," said George, haughtily, "trying to lend an air of poetry herwise bald statement that it is snowing. However, trying to ry to you is much like trying to talk it to a horse."
ɔt that a horse wouldn't pay for this lunch."
ɹeither need you, were it not that I am short of funds at the "

a moment that had lasted, so far, as long as George had, and t would have been pleasantly unkind to say so, I refrained.
ht like this," I said, "fills me with apprehension at the cold to come. Still, I can console myself with the thought that it will ın a matter of a few months and I can then amuse myself by ıpprehension at the hot weather to come. A periodic change of ısion, I suspect, is good for one and feeds that necessary feeling discontent."
der why," said George, "they call discontent divine."
ɹse it's discontent with things as they are that has driven hu- nto the creation of civilization and culture. Contentment would ɨtagnation and to stultification, as in your case. And yet even rge, if the stories you inflict on me are true, recognize the divine nt in others and you then labor to improve their lot. Of course, same stories that you continue to inflict on me remain true, it ɔpear that your interference in the lives of your friends invariably catastrophe."
e reddened. "That's twice in one short statement you've cast the slices of life which I have favored you with."
ɨ of life that include a two-centimeter extraterrestrial being that call up through a space warp and that can do all sorts of things ıuman technology is not something which it is difficult to doubt."
I also resent your statement that my good-natured help invari- ds to catastrophe. That is a statement so wide of the truth that the angels in heaven are weeping on your behalf at this very "
·y weep, the divine tears are falling on your behalf. You're the recounts the tales and describes the catastrophes. I am merely them out."
act is, old man, that I have, on occasion, produced a happy, love- arriage, replete with fidelity and morality, something that is


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entirely my doing. The case I am thinking of is that of Euphrosyne Mellon and her husband, Alexius. I will now tell you their story."

"Actually, I don't want to hear the story."

Euphrosyne Mellon [said George] was Euphrosyne Stump before her marriage and I knew her from a child. She was a shy tot, who, when introduced to those outside her immediate family, would shrink behind the nearest item of furniture and peep out through large and bashful eyes. This shyness of hers was never overcome, and as she grew older, it centered itself on members of the opposite sex.

This grew the more incongruous when, as she grew up, she turned into a miracle of appropriate proportion, possessing the body of a goddess. She was a small goddess, to be sure, only five feet two inches tall, but the young men of the vicinity did not fail to notice the phenomenon.

Many a young man attempted to scrape up a friendship and if they had succeeded then, for all I know, they would have engaged her in deep philosophical discussions. I could never put that to the test, however, nor could she, for they never managed to scrape up the necessary friendship that is the prerequisite for such discussions.

Euphrosyne carefully dressed in such a fashion as to obscure the startling nature of her physical attributes, but found that young men have a sixth sense in those respects. A young man with scarcely enough sense to find an omelet resting on a plate in front of him can nevertheless pierce, in his mind's eye, the layers of burlap with which Euphrosyne swathed herself, to detect the wonders beneath.

I was, of course, her godfather, for, as I have told you on previous occasions, I have been blessed with an inordinate number of beautiful god-daughters, undoubtedly because of my intense virtue and respectability. Even Euphrosyne made an exception of me in what was an otherwise universal suspicion of the motives of the male sex.

She sat on my lap and sobbed into my shoulder while I stroked her golden hair.

"It is simply that I cannot bear to touch any of those creatures," she said, "and I feel that they have that vicious tactile urge. I can't help but notice that they generally wash their hands before they approach me, as though they feel that they will achieve greater success with clean hands."

"And won't they?"

Euphrosyne shuddered. "Filthy hands I could not endure, but clean hands are not much better, Uncle George."

"And yet you sit on my lap, and I am stroking your hair and, I believe, occasionally your shoulder and upper arm."

"That's different, Uncle George. You're *family*."



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I continued stroking. Family has its privileges.

Considering her attitude, though, you can well imagine my stupefaction when she brought me the news that she was marrying Alexius Mellon, a young and husky man, of no great poetic gifts—of no small poetic gifts, either—who made a good living as a traveling salesman.

When she came to me with the great tidings, blushing and simpering, I said, "Considering your views on the male sex, Euphrosyne, how could you bring yourself to agree to marriage?"

"Well," she said shyly, "I guess I'm just a romantic at heart. I know that it's unsafe to let yourself be guided by mercenorotic motives. They do say that 'Cash is blind' and that seduced by it you make terrible mistakes. However, I've also heard that 'cash conquers all,' and I believe it now. I tried to keep away from Alexius and to lock him out, but everyone says that 'cash laughs at locksmiths,' and so it proved. And—well, I guess I'm just a silly girl but, after trying so hard all my life to keep away from men, I just woke up one morning, thought of Alexius and realized that I was helpless—I had fallen in cash. I went around all that day singing, 'Cash is the sweetest thing,' and when Alexius proposed again, I said, 'Yes, dear, we will get married and I promise to "cash, honor, and obey." ' "

I smiled and wished her all possible good luck, but when she had gone, I shook my head sadly. I had seen enough of the world to know that the golden glow of cash can make for a splendid honeymoon, but that when the serious tasks of life make themselves felt, cash alone is not enough. I mournfully foresaw disillusionment for my sweet silly little god-daughter, who had read too many tales of cash and romance.

And so it turned out. She had not been married more than six or eight months, when she came to me, with a white, pinched look about her. "Greetings, Euphrosyne," I said, heartily, "and how is dear Alexius?"

She looked about as though to be sure of not being overheard, and said, "Away on one of his business trips, thank goodness." Her lips quivered and, finally, with a sad wail, she threw herself at me.

"What is it, my dear?" I said, resuming the stroking ploy that I always found gave so much pleasure—and perhaps to her as well.

"It's Alexius. For a while, cash was enough. We spent freely and we enjoyed ourselves. It seemed we didn't have a care in the world, and then, somehow, he began to change. He began to hint that marriage entailed—love. I tried to laugh it off and said, gaily, "Cashiers live on cash alone." As the weeks passed, however, I found he was growing more insistent, and it dawned on me that I had married a secret lovaholic.

"It was like a disease, Uncle George. Until last week, we had been sleeping in twin beds, one on one side of the room, one on the other, with a heavy piece of furniture in between—like any normal pair of newlyweds



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would. And then I suddenly found a—a—a double bed in the room. He said that twin beds tended to estrange a couple. And now, Uncle George, I can't even call my bed my own, and when he gets into my bed, his hand touches mine sometimes. In fact, it keeps crawling toward me. I can't imagine what sick cravings may be overcoming him. Would you know, Uncle George?"

"Do you think, Euphrosyne dear, that you might grow to like the touch of his hand?"

"Never. He seems to be so warm all the time, and I'm always delightfully cool. I don't want all that male heat. I told him so and he said that I was a cold— Well, I can't tell you the other word but it begins with a 'bi' and it ends with a 'tch.' "

"I think," I said, "I can puzzle it out."

"Do you think, Uncle George, that he is no longer in cash with me? After all, you can't call your cashmate, with whom you've been spending together for half a year, a cold you-know-what and still be in cash."

"There, there, Euphrosyne. How long will Alexius be away?"

"It's a long trip. He's got to tour the southwest. He may not be back for a month."

"Leave it to me, then, dear, and I will think of something to do."

"I know you will," she said, her charming little face looking up at me trustingly, "You're *family*."

It seemed to me it was a case for Azazel and I called him up. He appeared on the usual shelf I had fixed up for him at eye level. He was, as usual, unprepared for the call-up, and, as usual, he caught my eye without warning and let out his usual piercing squeak. He claims he always reacts in that fashion when he comes unexpectedly face-to-face with a horrible monster, though why he should squeak when he sees me, he has never explained.

He seemed a little redder than usual, as though he had been engaged in some exertion, and he did have an object in this tiny hand that looked like a beebee shot. Even as he squeaked at the sight of me, he was still lifting and lowering it rhythmically.

He said, "Do you realize that you have interrupted me in my setting-up exercises?"

"Sorry!"

"And what good does that do? Now I'm going to have to miss my exercises for today. Just skip them. How I am to keep in shape I simply don't know."

"Why do you have to miss them, Oh, Grand and Exalted Ruler of the Universe? Can't you go back to the instant at which you left and continue with your exercises?"



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"No, that's too complicated, and I don't need your foolish advice. I'll just skip them. But let me ask you a question—"

"Yes, Your Puissance?"

"So far, you have interrupted me in games of chance—when I was about to win. You have also interrupted me when I was in the process of receiving various honors, when I was taking showers, when I was engaged in complicated rituals with certain fair members of my species. How is that not until now have you interrupted me at my daily exercises? If you must interrupt me, *that* is the time to do so. Make sure you do it again."

And he put down the beebee shot and kicked it to one side. I gathered he was not fond of his daily exercises.

"What is it you want this time?" he asked sourly.

I told him the tale of Euphrosyne and Alexius Mellon, and he made little tch-ing noises with this tongue. "The old, old story," he said. "Even on our world, the misguided follies of youth create untold unhappiness. —But it seems to me that this Euph—Euph—or whatever her name is, need only join with her mate in his vile and perverted desires."

"But that's what's wrong, O One of Infinite Might, she is a pure and unsullied damsel."

"Come, come, you have just committed an oxymoron. At least, you have if the damsels on your world are anything like the damsels on my world. I have encountered, in my time, an incredible collection of cold zybbuls—and by zybbuls, I am referring to female domestic animals—"

"I know what you mean, Overpowering One, but what do we do about Euphrosyne?"

"Actually, it strikes me as simple. Since she objects to male warmth—Can you bring me a photograph of her or an article of clothing—something I can focus my energies on?"

I had, as good fortune would have it, one of her more revealing photographs, at which Azazel made a dismal face. It didn't take him long, however, to do whatever he had to do, and then he departed. I noticed that he left his beebee shot behind him. As a matter of fact, I have the beebee shot in my pocket and I will show it to you as proof of Azazel's existence. —Well, I don't know what you would consider "real" evidence, to use your phrase, but if you don't want to look at it, I will continue.

Two weeks later, I met Euphrosyne again. She looked more miserable than ever and I feared that, whatever it was that Azazel had done, he had only made things worse. And Azazel never consents to modify anything he has done.

"Has Alexius come home yet?" I asked.



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"He'll be home on Sunday," she said listlessly. "Uncle George, has it seemed to you to be cold lately?"

"Not unseasonably so, my dear."

"Are you sure? I feel it so, for some reason. I just sit around all day shivering. Underneath this heavy overcoat, I've got my warmest suit and I've got nice warm underwear under that and I've even got woolen socks over my panty hose, and heavy shoes over that, and I'm *still* cold."

"Perhaps you're undernourished. A nice big bowl of navy bean soup would warm you up miraculously. And then, if I were you, I would get into bed. Turn on the heater in the room, and pile on the blankets and you will be as warm as a beach on a south Pacific isle."

"I don't know," she said, wrinkling her adorable nose and shaking her head. "It's when I'm in bed that I feel coldest. My hands and feet especially seem lumps of ice. When Alexius gets back, he won't want to get into bed with me, I'm so cold. That will be one good thing," she added darkly. "He's going to find out I'm really a cold what-he-said."

Two more weeks passed and there was a knock on my door; a happy knock if ever I heard one; the rat-tat-tat of a blissful knuckle. I was engaged in some complicated mathematical maneuvering in connection with some equine statistics, as I recall, and I was not very pleased at the interruption, but when I opened the door, in whirled Euphrosyne, virtually dancing.

I gaped. I said, "What it is, Euphrosyne?" And, trying to account for her ecstasy, I added, "Has Alexius left all his cash with you and run away?"

"No, no, Uncle George, of course not. Alexius has been home for a week, that dear good man."

"Dear, good man? Do you mean he has gotten over his lovaholic tendencies and has returned to the blissful enjoyment of cash?"

"I don't know what you're talking about, Uncle George," she said, her little chin held high. "All I know is that the day he came home, I got onto my side of the bed and I was colder than ever. I was blue and shivering. And then he got into bed on his side and it seemed to me that I could feel his warmth at a distance. I don't know how he managed it, but his body seemed to exude a delightful heat that just washed over me. Oh, it was bliss."

"Naturally, I just moved toward the warmth. He was like a magnet and I was an iron filing. I felt myself slide toward him and, in fact, I slammed into him and threw my poor cold arms about him. He let out a fearsome shriek at the touch of my cold hands and feet, but I wasn't going to let him go. I held on more tightly than ever.

"He turned around to face me and said, 'You poor thing. You're so



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cold.' And he put his sweet, warm hands on my icy back and passed them up and down. I could feel the warmth of his hands through my nightgown, up and down, up and down. Uncle George, I just slept in his arms, happily. I never had a better night, and in the morning I hated to have him get out of bed. I'm afraid he had to fight me off. 'Don't go,' I said, 'I'll get cold.' But he had to go.

"And it's been like that every night. Such happiness. In the warm arms of my warm Alexius, Uncle George, it seems to me that even cash has lost its importance. There's something so cold about cash."

I said, "Hush, child," for I found that shocking.

"No, I mean it," she said.

"Tell me, dear," I said, "with all that hugging and touching and warming, did you—" I paused, unable to find words for the shameful thoughts that crossed my mind. After all, I am old enough to have plumbed the wickedness of the world.

"Yes, I did," she said, proudly, "and I don't think that there's anything wrong with it. Oh, moralists can talk all they want about cash being the greatest of God's gifts to men, and they can say that 'love is the root of all evil,' but I say that love is the warmest thing."

"What will you do in the summer?" I challenged her.

"So I'll sweat a little," she said, and I knew she was lost beyond all redemption.

I never knew a marriage as happy as that of Euphrosyne and Alexius Mellon. They were warm every night, sweating a little in the summer, and they had two children eventually.

And Euphrosyne changed completely. She was no longer in the least afraid of men, or suspicious of their motives. In fact, she welcomed their motives and took to speaking in a very depreciating manner of any of them who seemed imbued with an old-world courtesy.

She dressed in such a way as to attract the attention of the males and did, indeed, attract them in large numbers.

She confided in me, later on, that out of sheer curiosity, she had attempted to warm herself on one or another of them, but after the fifteenth or sixteenth attempt—she admitted she had lost count—she had given up. None of them had the heavenly warmth of Alexius.

She is a little petulant about the matter, and complains that love, unlike cash, should be shared; and that love, unlike cash, can only be increased by giving freely. She kept on saying that even though I reminded her that cash, shrewdly invested, would bring in large profits.

And so she remains with Alexius and if that is not a happy ending, what is?

* * *



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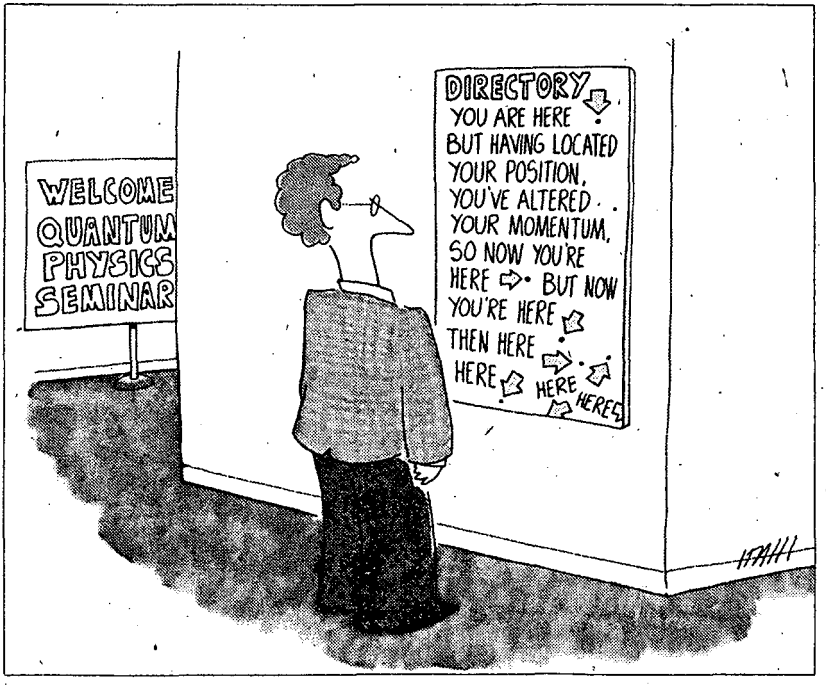
"It sounds to me, George," I said, "as though Euphrosyne is probably very unhappy at not getting any pleasure out of illicit relationships and finds herself monogamous as a matter of force through Azazel's interference, rather than of choice."

"As I said," said George, "she *is* a little petulant at the failure of her experiments, but what of that? A little unhappiness is a trifling payment for the achievement of morality. And," he added, "when the folly of love lifts from her wearied body, which it does, now and then, there's still cash, always cash, always cash. As, for instance, when I tell you that I can use a five dollar bill for a few days."

The few days have also lasted all of George's life, but I gave him the five dollars, anyway. ●



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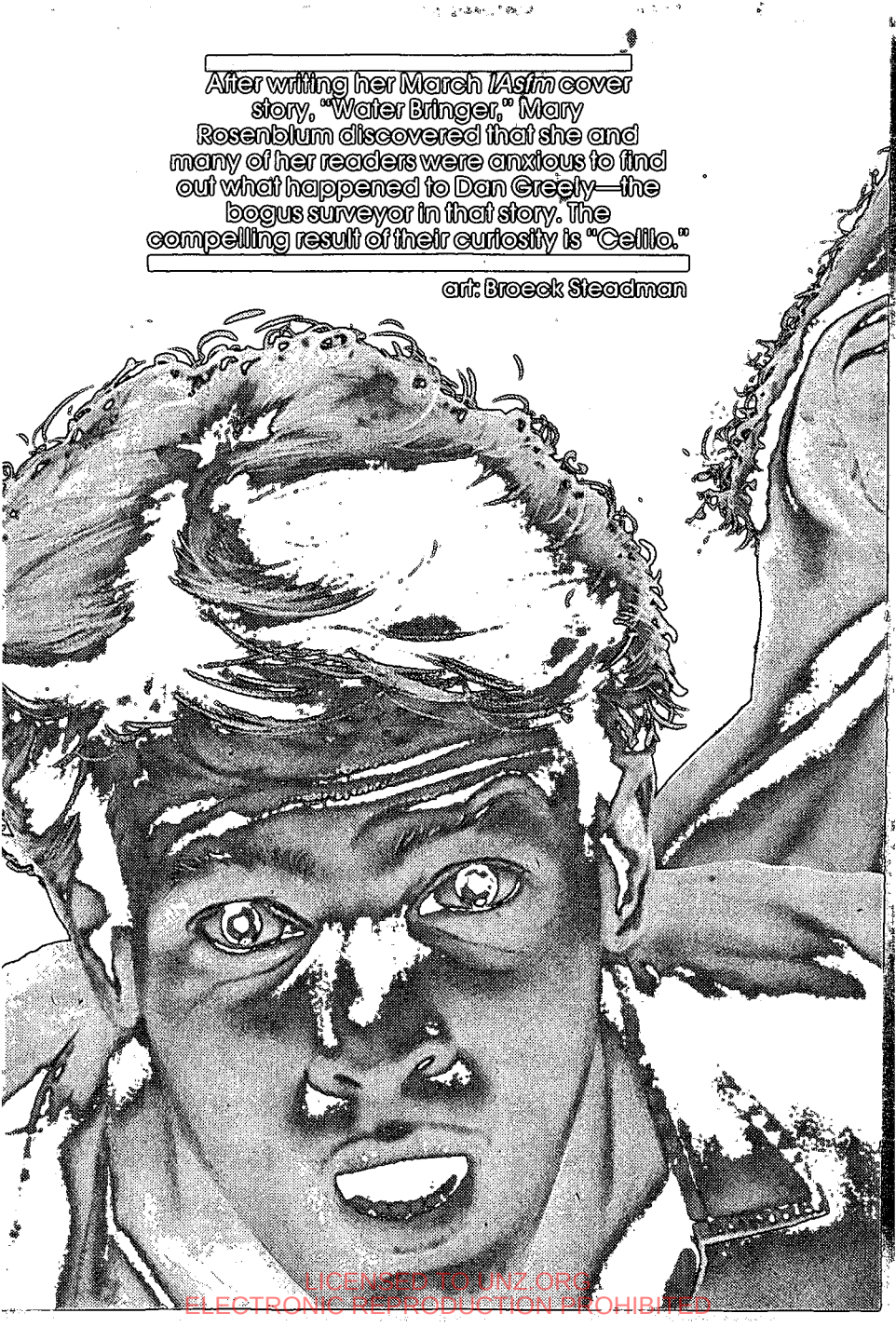
After writing her March *IAsfm* cover story, "Water Bringer," Mary Rosenblum discovered that she and many of her readers were anxious to find out what happened to Dan Greely—the bogus surveyor in that story. The compelling result of their curiosity is "Celilo."

art: Broeck Steadman



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Dan Greely limped slowly eastward, along the old highway. The empty bed of the Columbia river dropped away on his right, a huge gash of cracked clay and weathered gray rock. The Project pipe gleamed dull silver, half-buried in the middle of the riverbed. The Drylands was at his back, The Dalles somewhere up ahead, hidden by the high walls of the gorge. A semi roared past, a local making up with a convoy, maybe. There wasn't much traffic. Dan wiped sweat and grit from his face, shaded his eyes against the glare of setting sun. Those were the old falls, up ahead. Already. He lowered his hand, stomach knotting like it always did.

Thirteen years ago.

That wall of stone never changed. Every time he had to pass it, it looked the same, as if the heat had dried up time in this place, preserved it, like the shriveled carcass of a coyote he'd found once, out in the Dry.

Dan caught his breath. Someone, *someone,* stood on the brink of the dry falls, where the rocks jutted out over the deepest part of the riverbed. Dan thought he caught a glimpse of black hair blowing in the wind.

Like Amy's hair. He swallowed, his throat dry. Only there wasn't any wind on this hot, still afternoon—not up here on the highway, anyway.

Amy was *dead,* damn it. Thirteen years dead, and how many times had he walked or hitched past these bloody rocks anyway? Dan wrenched his gaze away from the falls, stumbled. His pack pulled him off-balance, and he gasped as his weight came down on his bad knee. The searing pain caught him by surprise, kicked his feet out from under him. Tires blurred by in a rush of motion, inches from his face as he fell.

Brakes screeched and doors slammed. "Hey, you all right?" Footsteps scraped on sandy asphalt. "I damn near ran you over."

"My knee." Dan breathed shallowly, sweating.

"Let's see." A man squatted beside him, lean and weathered brown. "Jesse, come take a look, will you? You got a touch for this sort of thing."

A woman joined him, older, with a lined, sun-dried face and a thick braid of gray hair.

"I twisted it. Yesterday." Dan pulled up the leg of his cut-off jeans, throat thick with the hurting. He sucked in his breath as the woman prodded the puffy flesh around his kneecap.

"Might just be a sprain or something might be torn. You can't tell with joints." Her faded shirt flapped in the wind as she shrugged. "A splint's the best you can do, give it some rest. It'll get better or it won't." She said it resentfully, as if Dan had asked her for a handout.

A typical hick, he thought silently. They didn't share, not for free. "If you could just give me a ride into town . . . ?" he said through clenched teeth.

"You heard Jesse. You can't walk around like that." The man shook



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his head, rocked back on his heels. "You stay a couple days with us, rest that knee up, and I'll give you a ride into town come market day. Maria won't mind."

"Hell she *won't*." The woman tossed her braid back over her shoulder. "Maria has enough trouble feeding you all as it is, Sam. He can stay with me, since you're going to be stubborn. Renny's convoy isn't due in until market day, so I've got space."

She was talking over Dan's head, as if he was deaf or a dog. "Thanks, ma'am." Dan made his voice humble, but it was hard to hold onto his anger. *Bitch,* he wanted to yell at her. The *weight* of the pain scared him. What if he'd screwed his knee up for good? "I sure appreciate it." Dan swallowed the bitter anger back down. He might not be able to make it to The Dalles, if they drove off and left him. In this dry world, you did whatever it took to get by. Or you died.

He let the man help him up, leaned hard on his shoulder, and it wasn't an act. The pickup cab smelled of sweat and dust. Dan sat in the middle, crowded between the two hicks, squeezed by his fear. He couldn't get stuck *here*—so close to the falls, so close to the past.

"I'm Sam Montoya," the man said. "This is Jesse Warren." He chuckled. "She don't really bite."

Dan didn't care if she did. "I'm Dan Greely. From La Grande." Not recently, but it was a safe reference.

Dan braced himself against the patched vinyl seat as the truck lurched down off the highway, onto a dirt track. He clenched his teeth against the pain as they climbed up through the cliffs that fenced the Oregon side of the gorge. Vertical ridges of gray rock rose on their left. On their right, the Columbia bed looked like a dry wound in the earth's crust. With a groan of gears, the truck heaved itself over the rim and out onto rolling land.

Why had this man picked him up? People didn't *do* that, anymore. Dan stared out at dusty fields of drip-irrigated, ultra-engineered soybeans. Dead, dun land separated the hillside fields, dotted with sparse clumps of tough grass. A dustdevil twisted across a rocky draw, stirring the tumbleweed skeletons. Water for crops made you a hick. If you didn't have *water,* you had to find *something* that the hicks wanted.

No one gave anything away.

So what did these people want? Dizzy and a little sick from the truck's jolting, Dan closed his eyes. He didn't like not knowing.

The truck turned off onto a narrow track that led back toward the riverbed, stopped finally in front of a small, weathered house at the very edge of the gorge. Drooping soybeans surrounded it, and a gray barn sagged behind a tumbled-down pole corral. Dan slid cautiously down



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from the truck cab. The steel cube of a Project meter jutted up beside the porch.

Everybody bought Project water along the riverbed. The Groundwater Mining Act had given the Columbia River Association deep-drilling rights to the whole damn basin. There just *wasn't* any other water. Dan let Montoya help him up the sagging steps. It felt almost cool inside the house. The main room was small—a table, a few wooden chairs, and a wood stove were the only furniture.

Montoya pulled out a chair. "Sit down and I'll bring your pack in."

It felt good to sit still. Dan looked around. This was an old house—you could almost call it a shack—cobbled together out of dried-out, gray wood, and warped, ancient sheets of plasterboard. Two lean-to bedrooms opened into the main room. That was it. Dan eased his leg up onto a second chair.

"This'll help the swelling. I'll wrap it, later." Jesse draped a wet cloth across Dan's knee.

Dan's skin twitched at the cold touch of the wet cloth. He leaned forward, folded it across his kneecap. Out in the Drylands, they cleaned dishes with sand, watered crop plants one at a time, with a bucket and dipper. He touched the sodden fabric, watched a crystal drop fall to the wood floor. These hicks were spoiled, rich with water. They could afford his magic tricks. He'd make out all right here, he told himself fiercely. His knee would get better.

"Want some water?" Jesse plunked an orange plastic pitcher and three glasses down on the table.

You got used to being thirsty, stuck it away at the edge of your mind where it wouldn't bother you too much. Then someone mentioned water, or brought out a jug, and all of a sudden, you were dying. "Thanks." Dan took the glass she handed him, drank it down in gulping, desperate swallows that he couldn't control.

"You headed for The Dalles?" Montoya thumped Dan's pack down on the linoleum floor, and picked up a glass.

"The only jobs are on the Project." Jesse poured more water.

"I'm not looking for a job." Dan managed to drink slowly this time. Project water. He drank it anyway. "I'm a magician," he said. "I was on my way into town to do a show."

Screened by the table top, he'd pulled the handkerchief out of his pocket, folded it into a tiny, tight roll, and had tucked it between his palm and thumb while they were looking at the water being poured. Time to start paying his way. He let them notice his empty palms, waved his hand over the pitcher and shook out the handkerchief with a flourish, as if he'd just pulled it from the spout.

It was smooth. Montoya whistled.



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Jesse grunted. "You had that rag in your hand," she said.

"You ought to do pretty good in town." Montoya set his glass down, winked at Dan. "I'd part with some dried apples for a show like that. A lot of folks would."

"If you've *got* any apples to part with." Jesse scowled at him, tugged at her braid. "Water bill's due, remember? You got to pay that, first."

"We can cover it. We did okay with our bean crop." Montoya touched her arm lightly. "Take care of our friend here, Jesse. Maria's gonna be pissed if I'm not back by dark."

Jesse grunted, watched him leave. "Sam's always too ready to help." She threw Dan a hard, hostile glance. "Maria's got another kid due, and they just get by as it is."

Dan sipped water, his pain turning into anger again, dry and bitter as the dust on his skin. "Out in the Dry, people don't have too many kids," he said softly. "Not for *long,* anyway."

Jesse stared at him for a moment, her face still. "I've got to weed the beans before it gets too dark," she said shortly. Her chair scraped on the floor as she stood.

That had been stupid. Dan listened to the screen door bang behind her, his lips tight. What if she threw him out? He stuffed the handkerchief back into his pocket. Montoya had even brought in his stick. Dan bent for it, listened, heard nothing but wind and the distant croak of a crow.

Wincing, he levered himself to his feet. *What if it didn't get better?* He fought the pain as he made his way across the floor. Yeah, he could get around if he had to. The dizziness caught up with him again, and he leaned against the doorframe of one of the bedrooms, sweat crawling slowly down his face.

A dresser and double bed took up most of the small room. Paintings had been pinned to the plasterboard walls. Watercolors? Dan risked a limping step into the room. A river twined across a dozen sheets, full of graygreen water. The Columbia? The painted banks were a blur of greens and soft browns. Had it really looked like that, once?

A glint of gold caught Dan's eye. A necklace hung from the corner of a picture frame on the dresser. Dan picked up the chain, twined it around his fingers. It felt like real gold. A thick amber bead hung from the fine links, with a tiny fly embedded in its translucent depths. Dan looked at the picture. A woman stared up at him through a windblown tangle of dark hair. She was smiling, but her eyes looked reserved. Private.

She looked a little like a younger Jesse.

"Curious?"

Dan's hand twitched and he dropped the necklace.

"I thought your knee hurt." Jesse stood behind him, hip cocked against the doorframe.



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"It does." Dan tried to control his flush. "I was looking at your paintings."

"Uh huh." Jesse's eyes measured him. "That's Renny," she said. "My daughter." She held out a couple of peeled twigs. "I'll put a splint on your knee," she said and bent to retrieve the necklace. "Stay out of my room."

"Yes ma'am," Dan said.

Montoya showed up next morning. Dan was sitting at the table, polishing a tricky double-lift and little-finger-break combination for a sandwiched ace trick.

"How's the knee?" Montoya set a plastic jug down on the table.

"Better." Dan touched the bandage Jesse had made from a torn sheet. The stick splints helped. "Take a card." He offered Montoya the pack, then dealt the two black aces face-up onto the table top. "Five of diamonds," he said and slipped Montoya's five openly between the aces. With a flourish, he picked up the three cards, placed them on top of the pack and tapped it square. "Now, sir, your five of diamonds has vanished." He spread the top two cards.

Only the black aces stared up at him, and Dan heard Montoya grunt. "Let's see if I can find it for you." Solemnly, he spread the pack face-down across the table. The two red aces winked face-up from the middle of the spread cards, a single face-down card sandwiched between them. Without a word, Dan reached for it, flipped it over.

"My five." Montoya picked up the card, turned it over in his thick fingers. "Pretty neat." He gave Dan a slow smile. "You do that pretty good, magician."

"It's just a trick, Sam." Jesse stood in the doorway, skinny arms crossed, brown dirt staining her hands.

"You're right." Dan gathered up the cards. "It takes two little maneuvers that I don't let you notice, and I set the pack up first."

"We must seem awful stupid," Montoya said thoughtfully. "Gawking like we do. Thick-headed."

Maybe, but Dan wasn't dumb enough to say so. He shrugged, and tucked the cards away.

"Yeah." Montoya cleared his throat. "You get your bill from the Association yet?" he asked Jesse.

"Nope. I can't pay it until Renny gets in, anyway. I'm short." Jesse scowled at the plastic jug on the table. "How come you've got milk to waste?"

"I wasn't planning on wasting it. I thought we'd drink it, if you'll get us some cups. Maria got our bill, yesterday." Montoya leaned his forearms on the table. "We got a foreclosure notice."



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"Foreclosure?" Jesse scowled, spilled drops of milk. "You're not *that* far behind," she said angrily.

"We are now." Montoya's smile had vanished. "The Association's hiked the rate again. Re-tro-*ac*-tive." He dragged the syllables out. "That means we're gonna owe more for all of last year. The beans ain't gonna cover it."

"Hell," Jesse said softly. "They'll cut you off." She handed round the plastic cups of milk, frowning. "Renny can lend you the scrip to pay off the hike."

Montoya shook his head slowly. "Sara Dorner showed up this morning, all upset. It's not just me. They're doing it to everybody between The Dalles and the Deschutes bed."

"You talk like there's something we can do about it." Jesse put her cup down.

"We can stick together, stand up to 'em!" Montoya stared into his cup. "If we *don't,* if we don't hang on, we'll dry up, blow away like the dirt, blow right on out into the Drylands." He stood up. "I got to get going. Think about it, Jesse."

"You can't fight them." Jesse yelled after him. "Why don't you listen to Maria and take care of your *own* family for a change?" She whipped around to glare down at Dan. "Why didn't you tell him that it's no use?" she snapped.

She was right, but Montoya wasn't going to listen to some drifter. Dan shrugged. The milk was warm as blood, rich and goaty. How long since he'd tasted milk? Out in the Dry, people didn't keep milking animals much. There wasn't enough grass. What you coaxed out of the ground, you ate yourself. He shifted his weight, stretched his knee tentatively. He could walk, even if it hurt. Give it another day of rest, and then he'd move on.

Dan looked out the window. From up here, you could see clear down to the riverbed and the silver pipe. Right down to the damn falls. Dan sucked in his breath as he spied the tiny figure standing on the worn lip of the cliff, just like yesterday. Some hick, he told himself. A kid, playing around. He jumped a little as Jesse leaned over his shoulder.

"That's old Celilo Falls," she said. "My grandmother was half Chinook Indian. She used to tell me stories about the falls. All the tribes used to fish here." She stared down at the dry ledges. "She talked like she'd been there herself, watching the men spear salmon from the platform. She would have had to be over a hundred years old to remember that! Hell, maybe she *was*."

Jesse turned away. "She used to say that it was still there—the platforms and the smoking racks—everything. The white man had covered it all up with dams and water, she said, but the Salmon People kept it



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safe. When the water went away, it would all be there, just like in the old days." Jesse laughed harshly.

"When the reservoir started going down so fast and everything was falling apart with the drought, I used to sit here and watch the rocks show a little more every week. That was when I was pregnant, and that bastard Kelly Welsh had taken off for God knows where. Sometimes, I thought I could almost *see* them—up there on the platforms, stabbing the fish with their long spears. I was just hungry, I guess, and a little crazy. Maybe I just needed to believe in *something*." Jesse plunked a heavy pot down on the table. "There's nothing out there but dust. Here's the rest of last night's beans, if you're hungry."

She sounded angry, like she was sorry she'd said so much. Dan looked out the window again, but the figure had vanished from the ledge. Jesse was old enough to remember water in the riverbed. Dan couldn't do it, couldn't imagine that enormous ditch all full of clear water, millions of gallons of it.

Amy had been able to see it. *This place remembers,* she had said, the first time they'd gone out to the falls on a patch crew. *You can see how the river used to be, when you stand up here.* Amy would have recognized Jesse's watercolors.

"I know what the Association's up to," he said.

Jesse turned and looked back at him, the empty milk jug in her hand.

"They want your land," Dan said harshly. "They can bring in gang labor from Portland, make more money farming beans and wheat than they can get from selling you water."

"That seems like a lot of trouble, when all they have to do is send out bills, right now." She frowned.

"It's getting more expensive to mine water. Gang labor's cheap and permanent." Dan met her eyes. "You got to buy everything from the Association, and pretty soon, they own you."

Amy had signed them on after Mom had died. He'd been ten, and Amy had been desperate, scared by how close they'd already come to dying. He remembered that, how she was always scared.

"*Profit.*" Dan spit the word out. "The Association's got it all worked out. They've *got* the water . . . all they need is the *dirt.*"

"You worked on a gang," Jesse said.

"Right here. When I was a kid." Dan didn't look out at the dry falls and the silver glitter of the pipe. *You* were up here, drinking water while Amy and I were down there sweating in the sun, he thought, and resentment soured the taste of milk on his tongue.

*"What's going to happen to you?"* Amy had cried, when she started getting sick and couldn't work her shift anymore. *I told Mom I'd take care of you. What are we going to* do?



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"You aren't going to beat the Association," he said.

"I'm not going to *try*." Jesse turned her back on him.

Jesse was in the field, cleaning silt out of the drip-irrigation tubing, when Montoya drove up next afternoon. Dan sat on the porch, shelling sundried beans and counting the crop rows, figuring yields. The dry pods crackled between his palms. Jesse didn't have enough land in crops to get by. Good thing that she had a trucker daughter bringing in scrip. The necklace was back hanging on the picture. It would be worth a lot in, say, Portland. Dan tossed a handful of pale, pebble-hard beans into the pan. He wanted to get out of there, wanted to walk away right now.

Jesse bothered him. She made him think of Amy all the time, or maybe it was the falls being so close. Maybe Jesse was right, and ghosts really *did* hang around this place. He sent another handful of beans rattling into the pan. He'd hit the road as soon as his knee could take it. Maybe tomorrow. Dan nodded to Montoya as he climbed out of the truck. Maybe he could talk Montoya into giving him a ride to town.

" 'Lo, Sam." Jesse came around the corner, wiping sweat and dust from her face.

"Sara Dorner came over this morning," Montoya said, without preamble. "A couple of Association people came out to shut down their water yesterday. Seems they offered Matt and Sara a job on a gang."

"Let me guess." Jesse tossed her tube-brush onto the porch. "Matt shot them."

"Nope." Montoya shook his head, sighed. "But I guess he did cut up rough, threw a few punches. They took off before he could get around to using the rifle. Sara's pretty upset, afraid they'll be back to arrest him."

"Matt's a short-tempered fool." Hands on her hips, Jesse glared at Montoya. "I bet Maria's real happy about *you* being in the middle of all this."

"They'll get around to us next, so I guess we'd better talk to the Association folks. Jesse?" Montoya spread his hands. "They got to see we're all together. Otherwise, they're gonna pick us off, one at a time."

Jesse glared at him, gave Dan a quick, hostile look. "All right." Her shoulders sagged suddenly. "I'll come be a warm body for you, Sam, but it's not going to work."

"You got to *believe*." Montoya touched her arm. "That's all we got."

Jesse shook her head without answering.

"How about you?" Montoya turned to Dan. "Like Jesse says, we could use warm bodies. After market, I'll give you a ride west as far as Chenowen."

As if he'd been reading Dan's mind. "All right," Dan said slowly.

"Thanks."



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Dan turned away. "I'll get my stick," he said.

The Dorner place was way south, at the fringe of the irrigated land. A trailer house sat crookedly on concrete blocks, surrounded by fields of genetically engineered sugar beets. The dark green beet tops drooped in the heat, revealing the black-and-silver network of soaker hose and feeder lines between the neat rows.

"They're shut off," Jesse said.

"Looks like it." Montoya said grimly.

The Association didn't have to come out in person to shut off a system. Dan braced himself as the truck bounced through sun-hardened ruts. The electronic valves could all be operated from local stations. The hot wind whipped the dust away from the tires, riffled the drying tops of the beets. Once they were down, beets didn't come back. The dark roots looked too small to be worth much, yet. Another few hours, and the Dorners would lose the crop.

Montoya pulled the truck up beside a flatbed and a scatter of battered pickups. Tethered to a decrepit wagon, a bony Appaloosa swished its tail at flies. Twenty or thirty men and women milled in front of a sagging wire gate. The wind snatched at their clothes, fluttering shirttails like faded flags.

"Hey, Sam," someone called out.

"Carl's just finishin' up the pipe," a small, round-faced woman said.

Dan followed the pointing fingers. A crooked line of old, galvanized irrigation pipe led from a pile of freshly dug dirt down the slope and out of sight. Someone had the tools and technical skill to cut into a Project line, then. As he watched, water bubbled out of a joint in the old pipe, darkening the ocher soil like spilled blood. Someone cheered, and, in a moment, everyone was cheering, like it meant something that they'd busted into a pipe.

They didn't know the Association very well. Dan leaned against the fender of the flatbed. Jesse stood on the far side of the crowd, arms crossed, watching the hicks celebrate. She wasn't part of it either, any more than he was. She looked up suddenly and their eyes met. Her lips crooked into a faint smile, sardonic and intimate at the same time.

Dan looked away, flushing, angry suddenly. She was just another hick, he told himself.

"Here they come." A lanky kid with a shock of red hair jumped down from the back of the flatbed, waving.

The fun was over. Men and women sidled together, bunching up as a van growled toward them, raising a flaring tail of dust. *Columbia River Association* glared from the sides in red letters.

"Where's Matt?" someone called out.



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"Safe. Sara's with him and Tom."

Dan watched the guns come out—old hunting rifles and a few pistols. The van pulled up in a swirl of dust. Three men got out, wearing the Association's short-sleeved khaki uniforms. Not one of them carried a weapon.

Dan smiled to himself as the crowd noticed that. He watched rifle barrels waver and pistols disappear into pockets again. You think you're the only bunch that's ever stood up to them, Dan thought sourly. The Association would send people who knew how to handle a crowd. They always did.

"I'd like to talk to Matthew Robert Dorner." The shortest of the three stepped forward. His tone was friendly, like he'd just dropped by to chat.

"He's not here!" someone yelled belligerently, and the crowd murmured, closing in more tightly.

"Look, folks, I'm not here to pick a fight with you." The short man sounded tired. "It's a bloody nuisance to repo a farm. We're down here to keep the water coming, not to raise crops." He took his cap off, wiped his face on his sleeve. "You know how far the water table in the Columbia Aquifer's dropped in the last twelve months? If we hadn't built the Coulee Dam Extension, none of you'd have any water at all." He turned slowly, his eyes moving from one dusty face to another. "Most of you are hard-working folk. Don't cut your own throats for the sake of the ones who aren't. If the Association goes broke, the water *stops*. That's *it*, folks—beginning, middle, and end. That's all she wrote."

The wind rustled through the wilted beet tops. Men and women traded sidelong looks, shuffled their feet in the dust.

The Association man cleared his throat. "Water piracy is a big-time felony. You can get the death sentence." He looked over their heads, up into the hard blue sky. "I know you folks are upset. It's tough, watching someone you know go under. I suppose, since I didn't actually *see* anyone cut into that pipe, I could just patch it, pretend it didn't happen."

Slick. Dan stretched his aching knee gently. The man was putting himself on *their* side—just one of us folks, trying to make it, fighting the weather like everyone else. Underneath the smile, he was letting them know that they couldn't win. He'd do a smooth card trick, Dan thought sourly.

He watched eyes shift, feet scuff up more dust. They were seeing their own crops drooping in the sun. They were listening to the ugly ring of *felony* and *death sentence,* deciding that they could meet the rate hike *somehow*, and that Matt was a reckless fool, not worth risking your own family's living for. You couldn't fight the weather, couldn't fight the Association. You fought just to stay alive, didn't risk the little you



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had—didn't risk it for *anybody*. Dan leaned back against the hot metal, waiting to see who'd sneak away first.

"We could maybe understand a rate hike." Montoya stepped out of the crowd, thumbs tucked into his belt. "We know it's gotta cost a lot to run that water all the way down the riverbed, pump it up like you do. It's this 'retroactive' bit that's hard to swallow." His smile looked weathered and old as the cliffs. "We've given you whatever you asked for, worked ourselves till we dropped to pay off your water. Matt 'n' Sara ain't no lazy bums. They work hard as any of us, so if *they* go down, I figure we're *all* gonna go down. Since we ain't gonna leave, I guess we'd better figure something out."

His tone was quiet, reasonable, but Dan heard the responsive murmur, saw the bodies shift again, edge closer together. They were a crowd again, not just a bunch of tired, worried men and women ready to slink away and take what they could get.

The Association man felt it too, threw Montoya a quick, hard glance before his face smoothed. "Hell, I told you I'm not here to start a fight." He gave them a rueful smile, like he was really sorry they couldn't be friends. "If you don't pay your fees, or if you cut into the pipes, the Association's gonna come down on you hard and legal."

"What's this *they* shit?" someone yelled. "That sure looks like CRA khaki to me." A patter of tense laughter ran through the crowd.

"Have it your way." The man shrugged, turned his back on them.

His two silent watch dogs followed him, their backs stiff. Someone cheered as the van lurched down the slope. That started them all cheering again, milling around, slapping each other on the back and hugging, like they'd really backed the Association down, cut into the pipe and got away with it!

Stupid hicks. Dan limped back toward the pickup, leaning hard on his stick. He started around the front of the big flatbed, stopped. Jesse was standing on the far side, talking to a thickset, bearded man with the pale skin and tattooed left arm of a convoy trucker.

". . . she picked up a ride east, figures there's more work out there," the man was saying. "I don't know why she didn't come tell you herself. Short on time, I guess," he said, too jovially.

"That isn't any reason," Jesse said harshly.

"Hey, come on, now." The trucker scuffed his feet in the dust, trying hard to keep his cheerful tone. "I hate to lose my partner, but hell, I figure she'll be back. Come spring, maybe. You'll see."

"We both know Renny's not coming back, but thanks, Jim. Thanks for telling me." Jesse turned away, walked past Dan like she didn't see him.

Her face looked faded and slack, as if all the life had drained out of it. Dan watched Jesse start down the dirt track, stumbling a little, moving



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stiffly, like an old woman. The rest of the crowd was catching up now, still wound up and full of themselves. They climbed onto the flatbed and the parked trucks. Jesse was still in view, but no one asked what was wrong, no one ran after her. Dust puffed up from under her feet, whirled away in the dry wind.

Montoya did ask about Jesse, when he finally made it back to the truck.

"She decided to walk home," Dan told him. He stared through the window at the reviving beets. "Maria didn't come along, huh?"

"Nope." Montoya started the engine.

"How's she going to make out after the Association kills you?"

"I told her it wouldn't make no difference, if they're gonna kick us off the land anyway." Montoya gripped the wheel. "We make it together or we don't make it."

The truck lurched down the track, shrouded in dust. Dan caught a glimpse of the riverbed up ahead and the dry scar of the falls. "You're kidding yourself," he said harshly. "It's all pretend, like the card tricks. You didn't win anything up here today, and when those hicks figure that out, they're going to hide and let the Association eat you."

"They're good folks," Montoya sounded tired. "We're all scared, but we'll stick together. We'll help each other."

"You think they'll risk what they've got? My sister and I begged, all along here." Dan stared through the windshield. "She'd knock on doors and ask for water, just enough to get by. People don't *give* you anything for free, so she paid. I wasn't so little that I didn't know *how* she had to pay. This 'together' stuff you're talking about is a crock of shit."

"You gotta believe, first," Montoya said softly. "You gotta believe in *something*."

Dan clenched his fists. Where the hell were *you?* he wanted to yell at Montoya. Where were *you* when we hadn't had anything to drink for two days and that bastard sicked his dog on us? Where were *you* when she had to sell her ass for water? He trembled, wanting to twist around, wanting to punch Montoya right in the face. Where *were* you, you God-damn hero?

Montoya drove him back to Jesse's house without saying another word.

Dan woke to darkness and the sound of wind. It took him a minute to get his bearings, to remember the feel of the narrow bed in Jesse's house. The east wind was booming down the gorge. Sand and dust rasped against the walls. Dan rolled onto his back. Something had awakened him. A dream? He tried to remember, felt an ache in his chest as if he'd been crying, but his eyes were dry. Dreaming of Amy? He kicked the sweaty sheet aside.


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A board squeaked, and light glimmered in the main room. Jesse? Dan raised himself on one elbow. She had come in just before dark, dusty and silent, and had vanished into her room without speaking to him.

The bedroom door creaked, and Jesse walked into the room, a thick hand-dipped candle in her hand. The flame wavered and smoked, streaking the room with shadows and dim yellow light. She was wearing nothing but an oversized T-shirt, and her hair cascaded down her back and over her shoulders, coarse and gray, standing out from her head as if it was charged with static. Her eyes looked enormous, full of shadows.

"Are you okay?" Dan sat up, gooseflesh prickling his arms. She looked like a ghost.

Jesse set the candle down on the table without answering, stripped the shirt off over her head, and dropped it to the floor. Her skin was brown, lighter where her clothes had covered her, and her flesh looked lean, tough, dried onto her bones. The smoky light outlined the flat ridges of muscle in her abdomen, pooled shadow between her drooping breasts, made her cheekbones stand out sharply.

She leaned across the bed, ran her hands lightly down Dan's sides.

"What is it?" Dan asked, his mouth dry.

She shook her head once, and the ancient bedframe creaked with her weight as she slid one leg across his thighs. Aroused and uneasy at the same time, Dan put his hands on her hips, felt her shudder.

She leaned forward, kissed him hard. Her teeth bruised his lips, and Dan pulled her down against him, desire flaring like a flame, burning away his doubts. It had been a long time. They made love fiercely, silently, her flesh straining against his, breathing in quick, harsh gasps. Her eyes were dark and opaque in the dim light, focused inward even as she clutched him.

This was her answer to Renny.

Afterward, she slid off him and knelt on the edge of the bed, face turned to the black rectangle of the window. "I knew it was going to happen," she said softly. "I knew she was just going to walk away from me one day."

Dan searched for words that would have some kind of meaning, found nothing. When people you cared about were gone—they were *gone*. He touched her arm, but she pulled away from him, shook her head.

"I drove her away," Jesse whispered. "I could have gotten by all right on my own—taken off for Portland, maybe—but I had Renny to worry about. I'd lie awake at night, too hungry to sleep, and wonder if we were going to make it, what would happen if she got sick, or if I couldn't make the water bill. I loved my daughter, but sometimes . . . I hated her, too." Jesse's voice cracked. "She *felt* it. Kids do. She's never going to forgive me." She stood, shadows streaking her brown skin.



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Dan licked his lips, fingers twitching, wanting to reach out, catch hold of her, tell her . . . tell her what? That Renny would come back? You couldn't change the truth. Renny wasn't coming back. That it would rain? That the falls, the land, the earth, wasn't dead, or at least dying?

You couldn't change a damn thing. The Dry crept closer every day, and what was, *was*.

He listened to the wind swallow the soft slap of her footsteps. The flickering candleflame filled the room with moving shadows. Dan cupped his hand around the flame, blew it out. Hot droplets of wax stung his palm. He got up and limped to the window, drafts tickling his bare chest.

Outside, the sky was black, starless. Dan listened to the wind roaring down the gorge. Out in the Drylands, it would be whipping up dust, sending sheet lightning shuddering across the sky. You died in the dust-storms, if you couldn't find shelter.

Dan didn't go back to sleep. The wind kept him awake and he could feel Amy out there on the lip of the falls, waiting to haunt him if he slept. This place was full of ghosts—a dried-out piece of time stacked with layers of the past, deep as dust on the ground. Dan sat on the rumpled bed, listening to the wind, waiting for the night to end. Knee or no knee, he was getting out of here.

As soon as it was light enough to get around without stumbling over things, Dan fixed his pack. He filled his jug from the kitchen tap, trying not to think about Jesse, about how soon they'd shut off her water when she couldn't pay. He slung the pack over his shoulder, water from the jug trickling coldly down his arm. His knee hurt, but he'd manage.

The sun was just coming up. The door to Jesse's room was open and harsh light streamed across the neatly made bed. The threadbare T-shirt lay in a heap on the unrumpled quilt. Dan paused. "Jesse?" The wind rattled a loose shingle. "Jesse? You in here?" The doorway drew him like a magnet. Dan tiptoed, as if someone was asleep in the room, as if he might wake that someone up. Renny's picture was gone, but a glitter caught his eye. The necklace lay on the dusty boards of the floor in a scatter of bright gold.

Stiffly, Dan bent and picked it up. The tiny fly stared at him from the cloudy amber, and the cool links poured through his fingers like water. He didn't look at Jesse's empty bed. You do what you have to do, he told himself savagely, and shoved the necklace deep into his pocket.

The pack weighed a ton, and the rough track down to the highway made his knee hurt like hell. A battered van roared past Dan's upturned thumb. Bastard. Dan licked his dry lips. It was crazy to travel during the heat of the day, but the necklace scorched through the cloth of his



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cutoffs, burning him. He kept walking, leaning on his stick. Ten miles to The Dalles. Maybe he could catch a ride to Portland.

Thin clouds had moved in from the west, turning the sky a cheating gray. The hot wind whipped dust in his eyes, tugged at his clothes. Dan heard another engine, and stuck out his thumb. This one stopped and Dan smothered a leap of panic as he recognized Montoya's battered pickup.

"Leaving?" Montoya leaned out the window.

"Yeah." Dan clutched his stick, wanting to shove his hand into his pocket, close it over the heavy, hot gold.

Montoya got out, leaned against the fender. "The Association didn't waste any time," he said. "They started showing up last night, quiet-like, offering folks jobs. Supervisors. Gang foremen. Good-paying jobs, I hear." He looked up at the weathered cliffs of the gorge. "I guess you were right," he said softly.

He looked . . . defeated. "What job did they offer you?" Dan asked.

"Nothing."

No, they wouldn't offer Montoya a job. Someone would shoot him, one dark night, or run his truck off the road. The Association didn't fool around with troublemakers.

If they'd gotten this far, if Amy had knocked on this man's door, they might have made it, both of them. It could have happened that way. It hadn't, but it *could* have. The wind whipped dust in Dan's eyes. "There's another way," he said. "Go to the Army Corps of Engineers, down in Bonneville."

Montoya just looked at him.

"The Corps was supposed to run the Project—they run all the federal water projects." Dan shrugged. "The Association started out as a civilian contractor working for the Corps, but they had enough political clout to finally edge the Corps out. Not that the Corps' any better than what you've got," he said bitterly. "But they're losing a lot of revenue, so they lean on the Association whenever they can. It's kind of a war—you just don't hear the shooting. I don't think this retroactive stuff is legal." He shrugged again. "If it isn't, General Hastings might help you out—just to give the Association grief."

"General Hastings." Montoya said the name slowly. "How do *you* know all this?"

"I got a job with the Corps. After I ran away from the Project." Dan didn't quite meet Montoya's eyes. "I was a surveyor's assistant. You go talk to Hastings."

"Hold it." Montoya blocked his path. "I went down there. Back when I first heard rumors about this rate business. No one'd talk to me."

Maybe not. Hastings had never thought much of hicks.



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"Come down there *with* me." Montoya's eyes glittered, black and hard as obsidian. "You know this man. *Talk* to him. Tell him to listen to me."

"I can't do it." Dan wanted to look away, couldn't.

"I know you don't want to stick around, but I'm askin' you for this much. I'm askin' you, Dan."

No one had ever asked him for help. Dan turned his back on Montoya, stared out at the dry, dead face of the falls. Someone was up there again, sitting on the highest ledge.

"What do you see?"

Dan flinched as Montoya laid a hand on his arm. "Nothing." He shook off Montoya's hand. "You think you can pull this off, make some kind of magic, beat the Association?" he said harshly. "Well, you *can't.* You can't *really* change things, not today, not yesterday." Anger rose hotly in his chest. "The Corps laid off most of their civilian employees a couple of years back. Including me. I took a few things with me when I left Bonneville, valuable stuff. I stole it, because I was sick of begging. I went around in the Dry pretending to be surveying for an irrigation project. People gave me food and water and I paid for it with fake scrip, so don't ask *me* to go back and talk to Hastings for you . . ." The words and the anger ran out together, leaving him hollow, dry, and empty.

"So that's it." Montoya stared up at the gorge rim, his face etched like the rocks. "Thieving's a little like card tricks, ain't it?" he asked softly. "Turns folks into marks. You shut yourself away from 'em, don't have to care about 'em much."

"How many of them ever gave a damn about *me?*" Dan faced Montoya, breathing hard, like he'd been running. "Not one of them cares if I live or die!"

"Some don't." Montoya wiped his face on his sleeve, sighed. "What are you running from, son?"

Dan turned away, fumbling for his pack, wanting desperately to hate this man.

A big convoy semi came growling around the bend. It slowed with a hiss of brakes. "Yo, Sam." The bearded trucker who had delivered Renny's message stuck his head out the cab. "You okay?"

"Yeah," Montoya called. "I'm sorry," he said to Dan.

Dan didn't turn. You asked the wrong guy for help, he thought bitterly. He heard Montoya's footsteps crunch on the asphalt, heard the pickup sputter to life.

"You need a lift?" The trucker was staring at Dan with open curiosity. "I'm heading into Portland."

"Yeah." Dan straightened. "Thanks," he called, trying to shake off a dull sense of regret. "I'll get my pack."

He grabbed for his pack, then *had* to look out at the falls, because he


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wasn't ever going to come back this way, didn't have to be afraid to look any more.

And Amy was there.

He could see her as clearly as if she'd been sitting right in front of him, sitting on the smooth lip of stone, up above the cracked clay of the riverbed. Just like she'd sat, thirteen years ago.

Celilo Falls, eddy in time, coyote-corpse of memory. Dan stared at her, rigid, sweating. If he looked down into the bed, would he see a patch crew working on the pipe? Maybe see a skinny kid with black hair standing down there, looking up into the sun, looking up to see what his sister was doing up there?

The road ran almost level with the crest of the falls here, and she wasn't more than a few dozen yards away. She looked just like she had that day, all dried-up skin and bones, coughing and sick. She wasn't looking at him. She was looking out over the riverbed, staring into the distance, where the dry gash hazed into the walls of the gorge.

"You coming?" the trucker called.

He didn't see anyone. Celilo hadn't changed because there wasn't any rain to wash dirt away and reshape the land. Dan's fingers tightened on the pack strap. Your mind played all kinds of crazy tricks in the heat, and you couldn't change the past, even if it was right there in front of you. Amy was *dead*. It was all illusion, like card tricks, like Montoya's thinking he could beat the Association.

On the ledge above him, Amy stood up, leaned out over the rocks that had bruised her face purple and broken her neck. She looked so damn *real*. He could see her shadow on the rocks, hear the flap of her shirttail in the wind. Like he could just climb up there? . . . .

. . . and *stop* her, this time?

The cheating, cloudy light made the stones glow and her black hair streamed over her shoulders.

"Hey!" The trucker slapped the truck's door. "I got a schedule to meet."

"Coming," Dan mumbled.

A rock rattled down the cliff face.

"*Amy!*" Dan yelled, but the wind snatched the words out of his mouth. "Wait for me, okay?" he called to the trucker. He didn't wait for an answer.

He scrambled for the cement barrier, clambered over, landing with a grunt on his good leg. It *couldn't* be Amy up there, he knew that, but . . .

*You got to believe,* Sam had said.

What if time really *had* dried out in this damn, hot wind? What if this place *remembered,* like Amy had said, like Jesse had said? Dan stumbled and skidded down into the riverbed, dust whirling away from beneath his feet, knee stabbing pain up and down his leg. The wind was worse



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down here, channeled by the high banks. It threw grit in his face, tried to blind him.

Panting, groping for handholds, Dan scrambled up the rock face of the falls. Amy was right over his head, so *real*. So damn real. Could you hear a ghost's shirt flap in the wind? Dan's fingers slipped, his skin shredding on the gritty stone. He wasn't close enough. In a moment, she would fall outward, arms spread, like she was trying to fly.

Like she *wanted* to die.

Dan saw her take the last step, face turned up to the sky, body canting outward. . . . *"Don't!"* he screamed. "Goddamn you, *don't!"* He got his feet under him, lunged, pain spiking his leg, grabbing frantically. Too late? Too late? His fingers touched cloth, clenched tight, and he fell hard, knees banging rock, heard a cry, felt her sprawl with him—no ghost, no *ghost*—warm under his hands, against his face. Warm. *Alive.*

Thunder boomed overhead, dry and hollow. Dan lay flat on the stone, panting, face buried against a cotton shirt, arms clasped around warm flesh, hard ribs. . . .

"Dan? What . . . the *hell*?"

Dan's heart lurched and he raised his head slowly. The hair was gray, not black. The wind tangled it across her face, and she pushed it out of her eyes with a faltering hand. "Jesse," Dan said numbly. *Jesse,* not Amy. Jesse, standing on the ledge, looking down at the rocks. "You were going to jump," he said.

"No." She looked away. "I don't know."

She wasn't angry, she wasn't relieved. Her voice held no emotion at all, and her eyes were full of the same dun emptiness that filled up the Drylands.

"Don't do it," he whispered.

"What do you care?"

Dan fumbled in his pocket, still breathing hard, sweating with the throbbing agony in his knee. Thunder boomed like cannon over his head as he pulled out the chain, held it out.

She looked at the bright gold in his palm. "I don't want it," she said mildly. "Keep it." Her loose hair stuck to her face, veiling her empty eyes.

Dan's head was aching, pounding with the throbbing pain in his knee. "My sister jumped off this ledge," he said thickly. "They were going to kick her off the Project because she was sick, and I was going to go with her. Maybe she figured I'd stay on, after, that my chances would be better that way." His voice faltered. "Or maybe she was just tired of taking care of me, of always being scared that we weren't going to make it, that it was *her* fault. I think, sometimes, that she hated me, too." He saw Jesse



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flinch, looked down at the rocks below. They looked so smooth, polished by the water that he couldn't even imagine.

"Don't do that to Renny," he said.

Jesse made a small sound that might have been protest, or maybe pain.

The truck was still there. Dan could see the trucker shading his eyes, staring at them. He waved and Dan lifted his hand in return.

*What are you running from?* Montoya had asked.

Yesterday? Dan shrugged, laid the necklace carefully on the rock beside Jesse's knee and started to climb down. Every move was agony, but he made it. The wind had eased off some, and the sun broke through the clouds as he reached the bottom.

Jesse was climbing down after him, careful not to catch up with him. Dan leaned his forehead against the smooth face of the cliff, waiting until the pain eased off some. He could hear the truck idling, a low, impatient note.

Something stung his cheek, cold and wet. Water? Dan saw a thin, dark streak on the rock face in front of him. Another drop struck his forehead. Water was seeping over the falls. Had it actually rained upstream somewhere, or was the Project pipe leaking? Dan looked up.

Amy knelt on the ledge. It *was* Amy this time, not Jesse. Her lips moved, shaping silent words.

I'm sorry?

Dan felt another drop on his face, like a tear. His throat closed on everything he wanted to say, on all the hurt and the anger and the dusty years. "I love you," he whispered.

She stretched out her hand to him. Dan reached for her as she faded slowly, gently into the stone, into the clearing sky. He felt something, a gentle touch, as if her fingers had brushed his. For a moment, Dan had a vision of green water pouring down around him, crashing into spray, felt the cool water on his face. Then it was gone, and he was staring at gray rock, still streaked with faint dampness.

Jesse had reached the bottom, was staring up at the ledge.

"Look." Dan touched the rock, held up his wet fingers. "The falls aren't dead." Celilo. Eddy of time. Had Amy showed him the past, or the future? "I don't think they'll be dry forever," he said and drew a long, slow breath. "I think . . . I'd like to stay here," he said. "I'm tired of running."

Jesse tore her eyes away from the ledge that was empty now. She took the necklace out of her pocket, closed her eyes briefly as she fastened it around her neck. The bright sunlight sparkled on the golden links and made the amber gleam. "You can stay with me, if you want." Her smile was crooked and frail. "I've got a hell of a lot of space."

She helped him back to the highway, to tell the trucker that he didn't



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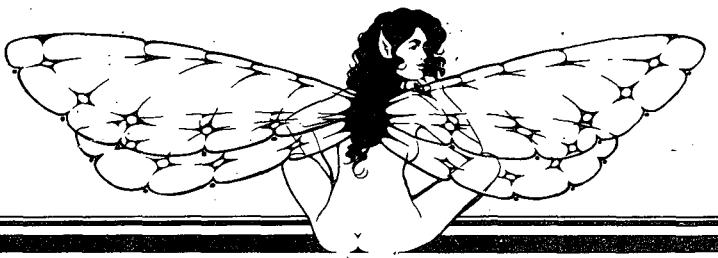
need a ride west after all. It was *scary*, standing still to let the yesterdays catch up with you. Risky, too, if he helped Sam bug Hastings about the Association. Dan looked up at the falls once more. The ledge was empty, but he knew it would be empty. He wasn't going to see Amy again. Not up there.

Some day, he'd ask Jesse who *she* had seen on that ledge. ●



# NEXT ISSUE

Nebula Award-winner **Nancy Kress** returns to these pages next month with another major new novella, our vivid and compelling July cover story, "And Wild for to Hold." The Time Rescue Project of the Church of the Holy Hostage has reached back through time to the sixteenth century and snatched Anne Boleyn, doomed wife of Henry the VIII, away from the chopping block and into a bewildering high-tech future. The staff of the Time Rescue Project have the noblest of motives—the prevention of War—but they hadn't counted on having to deal with the iron will and subtle intelligence of Anne Boleyn herself, and they soon find that in taking this *particular* Time Hostage, they may have bitten off far more than they can chew.... This is Kress at her best, at the top of her form, and is sure to be one of 1991's top stories. Also in July, one of our most acclaimed writers, **Pat Cadigan,** returns with some "Dispatches from the Revolution" that she melds into one of the most powerful and disturbing stories we've seen in some time. The world-renowned and hotly controversial **Norman Spinrad** is also on hand for July, returning to these pages with a new story for the first time since 1985 (although his much-debated critical essays appear here several times a year), and with a story well worth waiting for, too—a wild, fast-paced, hard-edged, and blackly funny story that deals with the intriguing question: maybe you *are* what you eat... but "What Eats You"?

(Continued on page 175)



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# THE MAN WHO INVENTED LAWYERS

## by Alexis A. Gilliland

In 1982, the author received the John W. Campbell, Jr. Award for Best New Writer. Mr. Gilliland is also a four-time Hugo award winner for Best Fan Cartoonist. Although we've published a number of his witty cartoons, the following is his first story for *IAsfm.*

Colonel Tiaranean entered the room and came to attention beside the armless straight chair facing the desk. He wore a khaki shirt hanging open over a black T-shirt, khaki pants without a belt, and grey felt slippers. Dismissed, the robot that had escorted him into the room scuttled off on six articulated legs, not unlike an insectivorous centaur, half-man, half-cockroach. The figure behind the desk remained in shadow, hidden by the glare of high intensity lamps shining in Tiaranean's face, but the red tell-tales glowed on the videocameras, so the session had begun.

"Sit down, please." He seated himself, and then: "You seem to have lost a little weight, Colonel," said the woman. A contralto, less strident than the inquisitor he had had before. "Our food disagrees with you?"

Tiaranean shook his head. "No, no. The food is entirely adequate. Sir." Bland, yes, boring, certainly, but adequate. His dreams sometimes centered on killing. Lately he had been dreaming about killing to obtain a clove of garlic.

His former inquisitor had insisted on "Sir." This one did not correct him. "That's nice, Colonel," she said, adjusting the height of the lamps. "What are you doing to amuse yourself?" A calibration question. They knew what he was doing; they wished to know what he imagined he was doing. Or perhaps the new inquisitor merely wanted to find out without reading the voluminous documentation that the machines printed out.

So give her a direct answer. "Leading a discussion group of classical antiquity, based on available resources." The available resources were a professor and a student who had taken his course the year before; the discussion group was the eight men sharing his cell.



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"Classical antiquity would be ancient Greece and Rome?"

"That's right, sir." Give her something to chew on? Why not? "We've been discussing the meaning of 'just.' "

She nibbled at the bait. "Not to the detriment of the regime, I trust?"

"Perhaps," he said craftily, setting the hook in his fish. "The specific case we were considering was a murder."

The discussion was drifting away from where she wanted it to go, but that 'perhaps' was irresistible. "What murder?"

"Just the facts, ma'am." She cleared her throat, and he corrected himself. "Sir. Orestes was the son of King Agamemnon and Clytaemnestra, a family with a history of violence, both foreign and domestic. When Agamemnon returned from the Trojan war, a protracted conflict not unlike some in our own time, his wife, having discovered some pretext or other, took an axe to him. The god Apollo, deeply offended, laid the duty of avenging his father's murder on Orestes. Orestes, obeying the god and acting in accordance with tradition at the time, then killed his mother, for which he was pursued by the Furies as a matricide."

"This is a fairy tale, Colonel."

"No, sir. This is the historical consensus. The question we were considering was whether or not Orestes acted justly." He paused a beat to see if she would turn the conversation to more normal channels; when she did not, he continued.

"The defense, 'I was only obeying orders,' had not yet been invented, so we are, as you will understand, in primitive times, indeed. Orestes fled to Athens and asked Apollo to intercede on his behalf with the Furies. Since they were in Athens, Apollo suggested he ask the local deity, Athena, instead. Hard cases make bad law, and since this was the hardest of cases, Athena dithered, appointing a commission of four, a court if you will, to hear the case on her behalf."

"You're making this up."

"No, sir. This is from the *Eumenides*, a play by Aeschylus who was practically a contemporary of the events under discussion. Shall I continue?"

A sigh. "Go ahead, Colonel."

"Thank you. The Furies argued for the prosecution, Apollo (who had, after all, instigated the murder) for the defense. Did Orestes act justly? One of the questions the defense raised was—why didn't the Furies chase after *Clytaemnestra*, who had, after all, murdered her husband, his father."

"A very reasonable question," said the inquisitor. "Why didn't they? If the Furies had been doing their job, Orestes wouldn't have had to act at all."

A shrug and a smile. "The arguments seemed specious," said Tiara-



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nean, "reflecting, perhaps, the imperfect understanding of the contemporary world. Basically, the Furies felt they didn't have jurisdiction. Perhaps that was why Apollo didn't ask the Furies to avenge Agamemnon instead of hitting on Orestes. *That* question never even came up."

"So what happened?"

"When the court split two to two, Athena broke the tie by voting for the defense, for mercy rather than for justice, and since the Furies were seriously annoyed, and threatened the direst consequences to the city of Athens if they didn't get Orestes, Athena offered them compensation in order to get them to agree to the settlement." He paused, knowing he had her. "This sounds a little far-fetched, sir, but Aeschylus is an unimpeachable source."

"Yes, yes," she agreed. "What sort of compensation?"

"If they consented to her decision, Athena offered the Furies a new title, 'Eumenides,' meaning 'the Kindly Ones,' and special honors in Athens, itself. The Furies let Orestes off the hook and Pallas Athena gets the credit for inventing the court of law." Do we want to get on with the business at hand? Not especially. He shifted from myth into history and deployed the professor's little joke. "It was someone else entirely that invented lawyers."

The inquisitor turned the lights up a notch. "Go on, Tiaranean. Who was it invented lawyers?"

"Solon the Lawgiver." Is she still hooked? If she isn't, she'll let me know soon enough. Right. "Solon lived in the city we were just talking about, Athens, which was part of Greece." The colonel rubbed his chin, considering his answer. "Well, no, by our terms I guess Athens would only be Grecophone. Nation states hadn't been invented yet; there were just these people hanging around speaking Greek and trying to get organized."

The brightness of the lights went up another notch. "Why did they call Solon 'the Lawgiver'?"

"It's a long story," said Tiaranean, blinking. The light was making his nose itch.

The shadowy figure nodded and repeated the question. "Why did they call him the Lawgiver?"

So? A rehash of ancient history was better than endlessly rehashing *his* ancient history. "Start with Athens under the previous administration," he replied, shifting his weight in the hard, armless chair. "A fellow named Draco had made their laws. He was a hard man who wrote down the death penalty for minor offenses because, he said, they deserved it, and for serious offenses it had to be the same thing, because, even though they deserved worse, death was all that was *left*."



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The roots of propaganda reach deep into language, and the roots of language reach deep into history. Draco had given his name to laws of ferocious harshness, forever. "Is this where the opposition got their whine about 'draconian law'?" asked the inquisitor.

"Yes, sir. He was, as they say, a hard man. Athens was split into factions, and a civil war was just about ready to break out when they called in Solon, who had a reputation for wisdom, and told him to see what he could do." Again, his nose started to itch and he suppressed a sneeze.

"Factions? What sort of factions, Colonel?"

Rattle her cage a little? "As is usual, the rich and the poor." The sneeze emerged triumphant and then he sneezed again for good measure. "Officially, they were for different forms of government," he continued, wiping his nose on his sleeve, "the better to exert their control over the city. The rich wanted an oligarchy, which they figured to own. The poor supported a democracy where their greater numbers could be made to count." There was a long pause, and he wondered if he had maybe gone too far. Nothing? She would let him know when he went too far. "You see, sir, the thing that was pushing the city to civil war was debt."

She laughed. "Come on, Tiaranean. Debt?" Debt was soft and mutable, fading insensibly into credit. There were a thousand ways to restructure debt, reschedule payments.

"Yes, sir. The debtor could be made to sell his children into slavery. Or be seized and sold himself. The only choice you had was to flee penniless into exile to escape the cruelty of your creditors. The basic issue dividing the factions was irreconcilable; the poor wanted their debts forgiven, the rich wanted their money back."

"Forced slavery is a little extreme, perhaps," conceded his inquisitor reluctantly. "But these poor people, they hired the money in the first place, didn't they?"

Tiaranean nodded agreeably. "An acute observation, sir. The poor were bound by the Code Draco to pay it back, but I don't suppose *that* had anything to do with the fact that Athens was on the verge of a civil war. More likely it was because there were so *many* of them."

"That's possible," she conceded. "A majority isn't always right, but it's always the majority."

He covered a smile with his hand. "It was at this point that Solon, who besides being a very wise man was not connected with either faction, came in and made a settlement. In addition to writing a whole new code of laws, he forgave the people their debts."

"And they called him the 'Lawgiver'?" sneered the shadowy figure.



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" 'Other-people's-money-giver' is more like it. You were asking what was just. The wholesale cancellation of outstanding debts doesn't seem at all just to the *creditors*."

Her interrogation has sure enough gone off the tracks, he thought. Let's keep it that way. "Yes, sir. In some respects, Solon seems very modern. The oligarchy faction, otherwise the rich, had surely acted lawfully under the Code Draco, so, therefore, they must have been acting justly when they forced their creditors, otherwise the poor, to sell their children into slavery. And therefore, Solon acted unjustly when he forgave the debt. But." That solitary "but" was a provocation rather than a preposition.

A sigh. The segue from lawful to just had not gone unnoticed. "Solon ought not to have forgiven the debt *ex post facto*. People need to pay what they owe," she mused. Then, sharply: "But *what?*"

"*But* he was in the process of *changing* the law, so therefore Solon acted lawfully."

"But not justly. Changing the law *ex post facto* is not just, and that is exactly what he did."

"Yes, sir. It may be that 'just' and 'lawful' don't really apply in this case. From the point of view of the oligarchic faction, or both factions, even, it may have been the best outcome that could be achieved in the circumstances."

The lights dimmed slightly. "What do you mean, Colonel?"

"The money was *gone*, it really was. By the time the factions turned to Solon, if the creditors had tried to collect, they'd have had a civil war on their hands. Otherwise they *would* have collected. And the debtors, they probably didn't want a civil war, but they *had* to have debt relief. So Solon cut a deal, where the rich kept their property unravaged and both sides kept the city in working order. That surely had to be worth *something* to them, maybe even a great deal. What Solon did was not just, and maybe it wasn't lawful, but it *was* necessary."

"Hmm." A pause. "No. An *ex post facto* law is never just, Colonel. Nor lawful, either."

She isn't listening, or else she clings to what she knows with the tenacity of a snapping turtle. Or maybe both. "Yes, sir. Unlawful is bad, and unjust is bad, but a civil war is *worse*. Necessity is, well, *necessary*. Making choices in the real world, Solon did the right thing for his city."

"Do you think so, Colonel?"

Tiaranean sighed. "If the Draconian Laws were so great, how come Athens was in such serious trouble? Any *ex post facto* law tossing the Code Draco into the dustbin of history has a lot to be said for it. And what Solon did afterward was interesting, too."

The inquisitor lit a cigarette, the momentary flare of her match re-



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vealing horn-rimmed glasses and a broken nose. "Go on, Colonel Tiaranean. What did he do afterward?"

The colonel repeated the professor's little joke. "That was when he invented lawyers, of course."

The inquisitor blew smoke into the cone of light. "Oh? How did he achieve *that* terrible thing?"

"It was an accident. What he did was write out the Code Solon, the whole corpus of laws for the city of Athens, and he got the city council to take the most sacred oath not to make any changes, you know, 'I swear to Apollo,' or maybe it was Athena in this case, not to make any changes for a whole century. In public. And, of course, the Code Solon *was* a bit vague when applied to specific cases."

The cigarette glowed as she drew on it. "So the people came to him for clarification and enlightenment?"

Elbows on knees, Tiaranean leaned forward. "Yes, sir. They wanted him to change his laws to suit their cases. He could have been the Tyrant of Athens, if he had wished."

"Except that he was wise, you said."

"Solon was wise. Yes, sir. And he, well, he *liked* what he had written, so he didn't want to change it to suit anybody's convenience. And after awhile, he got tired of that stream of litigants beating on him, so he took a trip to Egypt, a lo-ong trip."

"I see," she murmured. "So the Athenians were stuck with a set of laws they couldn't change, which also needed to be interpreted, and that was how Solon invented lawyers?"

"Well, anyway he set up the Athenians, who were a clever people, so that they had to invent lawyers themselves. Lawyers were a great improvement over what they had, though."

"Oh? What *did* they have, then?"

"Legislators. You have a dispute, go in and get a law passed to take care of it. If you were rich, you'd get yourself elected to the senate or the oligarchy or whatever it was, and make the laws to suit yourself. Justice was hard to come by in those days, and no man was secure in his property when the Legislature was in session." He discreetly refrained from adding: "The more things change, the more they stay the same."

There was a pause. "Justice is still hard to come by," she said at last, "but we shall find you out in the end. You may depend on it."

What a pity, Tiaranean thought. She's going to get back to business. But we wasted maybe half the session, no small victory for the spirit. "Yes, sir. I don't suppose it would do any good to ask for a lawyer?"

"No, nor a legislator neither." She turned the lights up a notch and opened the file in front of her to begin at the beginning. "When were you born?" ●



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# CANDLE

## by Tony Daniel

Brace yourself for Tony Daniel's
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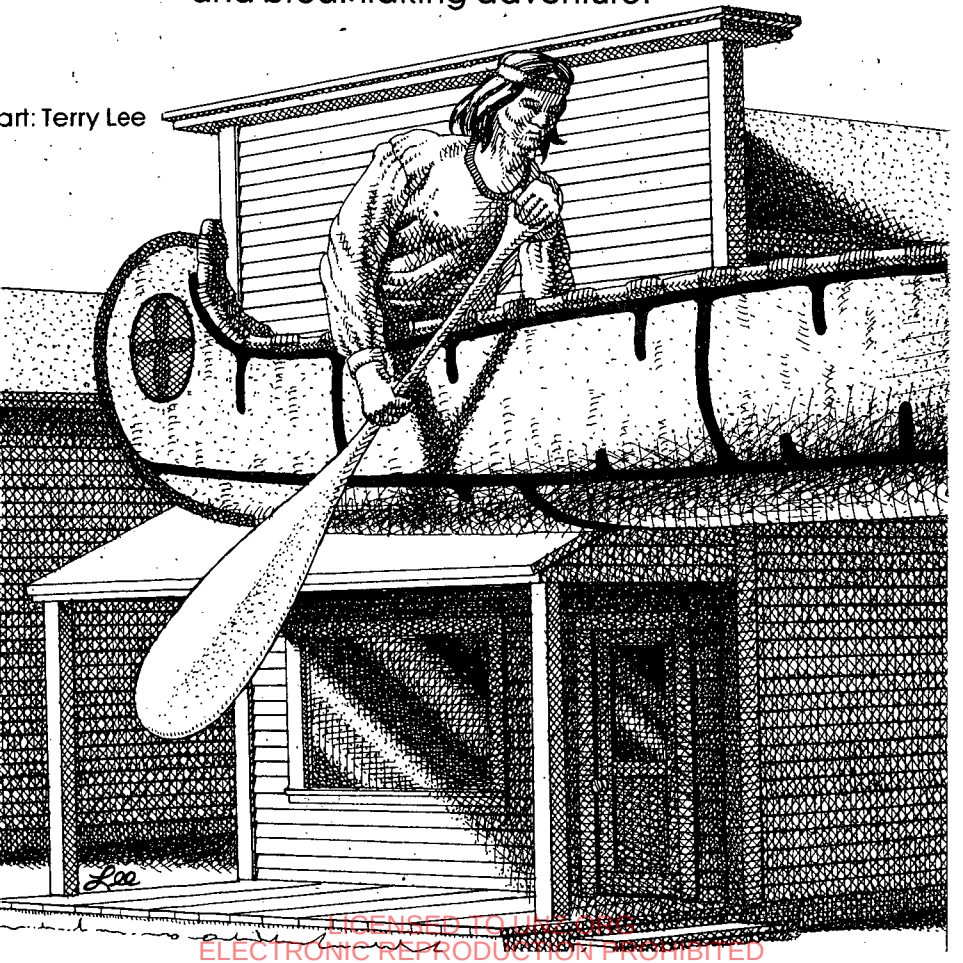
art: Terry Lee

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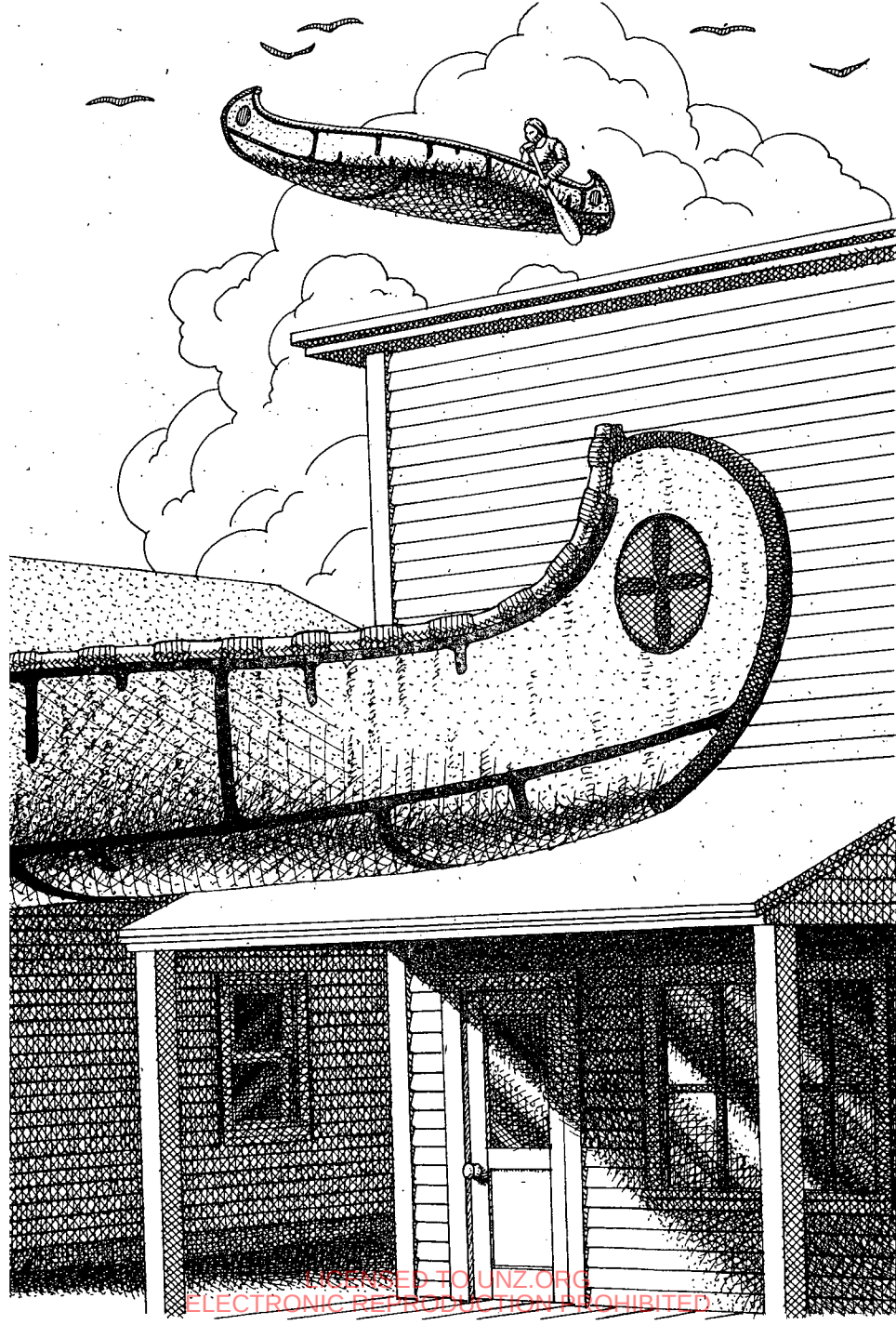

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## 1

Every day is an animal, you know. You can wake up in the morning, stick your nose out the window, take a smell. Feather musk of raven? Wired electricity of weasel? Clumsy thickness of cow? There will be a trace in the air. Then, as the day progresses, as Candle's old sun strains and pulls itself across the blue-black sky, as she wearily passes around the planet, over the horizon, the animal in the day takes shape, manifests itself, until you *know*. You know.

And I knew very well what animal *this* day was turning out to be. There was a scurrying in the wind, a clever quickness to the air, like the smell the sound of small feet would make running through shredded newspaper. A smell fast and mean. A flat-out *carpe diem* smell. Clouds hung close to the ground, moving behind the mountains, through the icy passes, like hunted things on the run—or hunting things on the stalk—misty, sneaking scavengers. This day was a rat. Unquestionably a rat.

I stood in a small clearing, on the very top of Canoe Hill. My down parka flapped in the breeze and I pulled it close around me. The hill rose halfway between Jackson, where I lived, and the Indian village of Doom. I could take it all in, all the human settlement on Candle, with one sweeping turn. After nine years on this flicker of a world, I still couldn't assimilate the sight, though, couldn't find a way to analyze and categorize it. The view from the hill reminded me of one of those prints of gay little towns in the nineteenth century, where the artist fills in the streets, the homes and businesses, with exacting detail. It was kind of like one of those prints, only the guy they got to paint the towns on Candle was evidently demented.

Imagine *this* print, if you will, a postcard to send home to your folks on Earth, to show them the quaint surroundings you find yourself in. Only your folks are long dead, and these are not just your surroundings, they are where you will spend your remaining days, and this print will always be a reminder of your absolute surprise that first day when you climbed Canoe Hill, and saw what humanity had made of itself in the last five hundred years.

It is a painting made, you might think, in the late 1830's on Earth, in the old United States of America. It depicts, in the rich, textured oils of the day, a frontier town. On the western edge of Missouri, you'd guess. Under a brindled sky. Almost a nineteenth century town, but not quite. The streets are not gold, or brick, or dirt. The roads are hard and smooth, made from silky-white, engineered bacteria-shit.

There is a small break in the clouds above Jackson, and the spider-silk streets of the town are shining white along this narrow slice of light where the sun strikes them directly. Many of them, however, are still a dull, glowing gray. The streets spread out from the town square like radials in an imperfect spiderweb. In the mixed lighting, it looks very



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much like a true spiderweb, but a spiderweb at night, when you shine a flashlight on it from the side and catch only a swath of strands.

You can just make out the tiny dots that are the good citizens of your adopted home. The streets are not truly made from the spinnerets of giant spiders, though, and the people below are not bugs caught in the city's sticky web. They move with speed and purpose along the streets, riding in hovers, or walking. The brick-and-wood buildings of the town shine dully where the light strikes them, and they all send cottony trails of steam up toward the sky. You might have imagined this steam to be the dissipated heat of commerce and industry, if you hadn't been told that the buildings were warming up their thermal coatings and melting off last night's snowfall.

On the left side of the old painting, in the west, is the Indian village, Doom, under overcast skies. Not that sunlight would brighten it up much. Doom has only walking paths between the houses, no streets. Anywhere farther than walking distance, the Indians go by canoe. Standing twice as high as the dwellings, like some king-building before which the houses lie prostrate, is the Gathering Hall, the center of religion and government for the clannish Indians.

You look above the buildings of Doom and feel a little contempt, for you find that the painter has got his perspective all wrong (unless he is trying deliberately to be primitive). A few canoes are crowded above the village, as if they are hanging in the sky. You know they *must* be farther away, to the north of the village on some large, blue lake, going out for hunting toward the woodlands, or towards Jackson, for trading. The painter has just neglected to make them smaller, to reflect their greater distance. A child's error. You mentally try to correct it, to put everything in its proper position.

Boom—epiphany: this is *not* a painting after all; it is your new life.

The canoes will not budge. They *are* hanging in the sky above the village, and you watch, amazed, as the two Indians at the bow and stern in each canoe paddle them easily through the air, as if they were gliding upon still water.

And now that I have observed the Indians and the settlers, it's time to place myself into that quaint painting. If you look carefully, toward the center of Jackson, you will see my office, steaming along with all the rest. You won't quite be able to make out the wooden shingle hanging at the entrance. The Candle *Cold Truth,* it says. It's the best paper in the Territory, if you ask me—but then, I'm the editor and publisher.

This morning I was taking some time off, however. I'd climbed Canoe Hill to meet a man who was returning from a long journey, and, yes, I certainly expected him to bring news I could put in my paper—but I'd walked the long way from Jackson because he was my friend. Gazing above me, into the cold blue morning, I watched as Thomas Fall returned, descending from the stars, paddling his birch-bark canoe. And even after nine years on my new planet, I still thought the sight was damn near the most strange and wonderful thing I'd ever seen.


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But this rat of a sky did not want Thomas to paddle his canoe down through it to get back home. Candle is known for bad wind storms, despite our attempts at weather control, and they're especially bad here at the equator, near the geothermal vents. This wind storm was worse than most. Thomas descended through an evil wind that few Indians and no settlers could have survived in, much less piloted with skill. He made it look easy, negotiating the swells and buffets of the atmosphere with a sureness which came from long years traveling to many worlds. He was only thirty years old, but there wasn't much he hadn't seen.

Since I am the reporter who was supposed to have been everywhere, seen it all, I was a bit envious. Truth to tell, Earth and Candle were the only places I'd managed to visit in my thirty-five years, and I hadn't seen half of either planet. Thomas visited something like a world a month, and he could relate a seemingly bottomless stock of details about each of them. Well, such is the memory and storytelling ability of an Indian Wanderer. Me, if I don't write it down, I can't remember when Jamboree Week is, or even the anniversary of my own instantiation. Sometimes I think that some of the old neural structure was scrambled just a bit during those five hundred years I spent being a radio wave.

When Thomas was about a hundred feet from the ground, the wind slammed into his canoe with redoubled force. There was a spray of mist in the air, and I could actually make out what looked like swirling tendrils, clawing at the gunwales of the canoe like some panicked, drowning swimmer, frantic for a handhold. This was no ordinary breeze, no backwash that the weather algorithm had to kick in here over the hill so that the old sun would keep shining over Doom and Jackson. This wind shook the canoe with a malevolent force.

Sarah is the name of our weather algorithm, though only I call her that, and this wind sure as hell wasn't Sarah. How did I know? I don't tell many people this, but I knew Sarah a long, long time ago, when she was a farm girl from Oregon. So I knew that this wind wasn't Sarah in one of her friskier moods. Too mean-spirited. Instead, it felt more like a bug in the system. Or, what I was really afraid of, like a programmed assault on Thomas Fall.

Tricksters tamper with the weather more than you'd think, especially out here in the boonies. Candle's security is not so good. What's the use of it, people think, when everybody knows everybody else and folks are basically trustworthy and good? What they don't realize, no matter how many times I editorialize about it in the *Cold Truth*, is that bad guys *know* we are thinking this way, and are prepared to take advantage of us. Or one of us could *turn* bad, and not care what anybody thinks anymore. It's not Sarah's fault. She's not self-aware, at least not like you and I. Weather algorithms can be confused by a clever person.

Take that Clerisy indwelling on Aeolus two years ago, the one that got wiped out when some priest read a little too much Mao Tse Tung, Willibus, and St. Paul, and went renegade. He seeded a tornado half-sentient, and told it there was food buried under all those little buildings



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with steeples on them. Wiped out a gaggle of monks and nuns. The guy who did it got away . . . or was it a woman? I just remember running the wire story. Come to think of it, my friend Frank Oldfrunon, who owns a bar in town and happens also to be the mayor of Jackson, told me a joke about that story: What do you call it when fifty priests get crushed under falling chapels? A good start. Frank and the Clerisy are not exactly on sharing-spit kissing terms.

Anyway, the harsh wind kicking up made me worry for Thomas. He yawed heavily to one side, sure enough, but then the silver in the silver-black birch bark which lined the outside of his canoe began to glow with a luminescence that was almost blue. Thomas was putting his mind to righting the problem. Above and around him, there was a gathering of light, a swirl of shimmering lines and flashes—coming together, congealing, into the face of a great black bear.

This was Thomas's chocalaca, his Indian pet—or, as some would have you believe, his familiar. Thomas had named him Raej. People have called a Wanderer's relation with his chocalaca a kind of symbiosis. Thomas just called it friendship.

I could feel the nasty rat of a day snatching at the canoe, mean and hard, trying to get a bit of the soft human-meat inside, or to pitch Thomas one hundred feet below, to die crashing through the trees and into the frost-hardened ground. Raej's great bear head looked around, turning like a huge holographic representation twisted from tubes of blue and green neon. The chocalaca looked like an advertisement, a three dimensional billboard over the line to an amusement park ride—Bear Mountain, say, or the Black Forest of No Return—attractive, scary, but, of course, you *knew* it wasn't real.

Then Raej growled.

The sound seemed to come from somewhere deep in the chocalaca's being (who can say if they have throats?), with the sound of thunder on the horizon, of a winter avalanche down the high pass of a mountain. For an instant, there was silence. No rat wind, no Sarah. Just the empty wash left after the passage of sheer power through the world, the brush of some demi-god's wing. Was Raej pure order, drowning out the patterns about him as a boat's wake will obliterate the spreading wrinkles of a small stone dropped into water? Or was his growl the ragged cutting edge of Chaos incarnate, grinding order to nothingness? It was *something* terrifying and awesome, one way or the other, and I sure as hell was glad he wasn't mad at *my* little gray-celled algorithm. He could probably wipe my mind clean with only a sweeping look from those glowing eyes.

Then the rat wind returned, slinking back in to surround the canoe, maybe to examine what had frightened it so. Again, Raej roared. Splinters of blue and white light shot out from the phantom bear's maw, like ice crystalizing in veins of rock. Though I could make out only a vague form, I imagined the rat wind beginning to split apart under that onslaught of power, breaking into disparate breezes.

All rats are cowards at heart—which is why they are survivors—and


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this wind was no different. It went scurrying away, leaving behind a stink like the smell of damp old leather shoes. The canoe quickly worked itself upright, and Thomas was smiling at me as he brought it gingerly down into the grass of the meadow where I was standing. Raej was gone—gone back to whatever place or company chocalacas keep when their Indians aren't paying attention to them.

Thomas rose from the canoe, and there was a faint crackle (it has always sounded like the crinkling of fine, white paper to me) as Thomas allowed the Effect to collapse and dissipate. He drew his green coat tighter about him as the perpetual chill of Candle's air, air which no weather algorithm can warm, rushed into the place formerly protected by Thomas's bubble of awareness. Or, as Indians and old-time ship captains say, as Thomas came back into the universe.

Thomas sat still for a moment, sniffing the air.

"Your weather's being bad today," he said. Then, after a pause, "But it's good to see *you,* Will James."

"Likewise," I said. "I don't think that was Sarah, making that wind."

"No harm done."

Thomas reached into the canoe and took out a backpack of blue-and-gray cloth. Green, blue, and gray were colors that went with Thomas, as the reds, yellows, and browns of deciduous tree leaves fit the autumn. It was late autumn on Candle, which, as Frank Oldfrunon says, means that when you piss, it freezes halfway down to the ground. In summer, it waits until it puddles a little, at least. In winter, you just don't piss at all.

Most of the trees here are evergreens the Indians brought with them, or the local sponge trees, but although there are plenty of scraggly hardwoods in the forests that the settlers planted two generations ago, I miss the bright red maple burning across the Ozarks, in Missouri, where I grew up. At least *there* you knew that, though winter came, it would pass and warm weather would come back again. Here, it just goes from cold to colder.

I helped Thomas swing his pack onto his back. He lived for months out of that thing, and the outside pockets were full of mail and messages from other Indian-settled worlds. Everything a Wanderer needed for his physical survival was jammed into its guts, because *most* of what a Wanderer needed, he carried packed up tightly in his head.

"You going to see Janey first, or go down to Doom?" I said.

"Doom," he said. "Have to let them know I'm here, so that they can get the Gathering Hall ready."

"Janey's not doing so well."

"How bad?"

"I saw her a week ago. Not good."

"I'll go there first then."

There was a tautness to Thomas's bearing. You wouldn't call it tension, not in him. More like a controlled state of readiness.

"You're infected to the gills, aren't you, Thomas?"



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"It's for Janey. You know that."

Thomas spoke coldly, but smiled when he said the words. There was a dangerous undertone playing around the edges of his voice.

"Besides," he said, laughing low and harshly. "Nobody thinks I'm bringing her rhythm. They just think I'm fucking her."

I'd gotten to be friends with more Wanderers than just Thomas, and I knew that, according to custom, they were supposed to be celibate. One passed through every month or so. Mostly I talked to them because they were my best sources for news, but also because being a Wanderer and being a journalist were not so different. Those that I knew had discreet and meaningless affairs with locals. Like I said, not really so different from journalists. Anybody who had a clue thought Janey Calhoun was Thomas's lay when he came home for Gathering. I knew differently.

"Yes, nobody suspects, really. I just worry about you sometimes."

Thomas didn't answer.

"There's trouble coming up, amigo, I may as well tell you," I said. "Real bad blood coming to a boil. Mostly over the clay, and rhythm, but also over other things. Clerisy isn't helping things."

A look of sadness, of weariness, came over Thomas. He swallowed, closed his eyes. Then he raised his shoulders and smiled at me.

"When has there *not* been trouble, Will?" he said. "Every time I come back, there's something new—but it's really the same old thing. And there's some bad news I'm bringing from Etawali. Some Indians got killed there. Then some settlers got killed. Over clay. Over smuggling."

My journalist's instincts kicked in, and I mentally called up my reporter's menu, selected the notepad pop-up and turned on the memory-banker in my visual cortex. The little red tell-tale began to blink in my right peripheral vision. I began pumping Thomas for details. We'd heard nothing about this in the last wire dispatch. But then Wanderers were faster travelers and were always scooping the Territorial Wire Service.

"Over clay ownership?" I said. It wasn't really a question, though.

"What do you think?" Thomas said. "Westpac's about to legalize rhythm."

"I'm not so sure about that."

"Doesn't matter. Settlers are convinced of it. They're getting greedy."

"And the Indians aren't?"

"Things are getting out of hand."

Thomas had been looking away from me, over Jackson and Doom. Now he turned and looked me straight in the eyes, and I suppressed a shudder. Looking into Thomas Fall's eyes could be disconcerting—like a bell is disconcerted by a clapper. And it wasn't the drug in his system that did it.

Let me tell you about Thomas's eyes. First, get a picture of the man: very tall, the kind of tall that you remember, that is kind of, well, *metaphysically* tall. He had the rounded features of his Mississippian Indian mother, the copper skin, encrypted with the black curl and jag of his Ordeal tattoos. But his eyes were startling in that dark, tangled face.



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Where you thought there was only unthinking force of presence, thick and oppressive as a jungle, you suddenly discovered native intelligence in them. They were old Jeremiah Fall's eyes, the small, piercing eyes of his father, the same gray-blue as Thomas's pack.

Was Thomas Indian or settler? It depended, really, on the light, on the mood. At the moment, Thomas had the Indian feel about him, thick as leaves in an Ozark forest: the quick attention to details that did not seem important to anyone but Indians, like the way he'd sniffed the air before he got out of the canoe, and pawed the ground when he'd stepped over the boat's gunwales. Like the way he carefully cupped his hands when talking about other worlds, Etawali in this case, as if by this action the planet would be kept safe and warm. And mostly, the air of brusque indifference Indians couldn't help radiating toward settlers—even though, in my case, Thomas and I had been friends for years. If I'd met him for the first time this day, I might have tried to speak the Loosa patois—the common language of the scattered Indian tribes—to him rather than English, thinking I'd have a better chance of being understood. Except for those eyes. Those eyes told you that Thomas wasn't Indian, although he sure as hell wasn't settler, either. You couldn't make any assumptions, couldn't predict *what* he'd do next. Just like his father.

Thomas started walking toward the edge of Canoe Hill, to the trail down into the valley below. He spoke over his shoulder, not looking at me.

"Will you come with me to Janey's?" he said. I didn't have to answer. I was always the one who set up the exchange of the drug. We usually did it at my place, so that Janey's sisters wouldn't discover us, and I was the one who watched over them to make sure nothing bad happened, though I had precious little idea what I could do if Thomas had come into a bad batch of rhythm and both their brains burned out in a quick flash.

We went down the hill into the green-and-white stillness of autumn near the equator. The evergreens and sponge trees intermingled to form a green-and-brown curtain on either side of us. The trail switch-backed down the hillside like the flick of a cat's tail. Snow patches were smeared along the forest floor, as if some painter had spattered a brush full of white paint in a generally westerly direction. Here and there, big granite rocks jutted through the snow. The air was cold, but still, so that the chill very slowly pulled away the warmth our bodies made, as if the warmth were a baby clinging to your neck and the chill a careful relative.

"I've really missed this place," Thomas said.

"Yeah, right. How many planets did you visit this year? Never mind. I keep envious record, friend. Twenty-seven."

"That many."

"Damn right. And every one of them different. All they share is the same language and a mistrust of settlers."

"That much is true."

I was about to say more, but Thomas raised a hand and cut me off.



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"It's just that I have a special place in my heart for cold worlds," he said. "For ice and snow."

Thomas's face was full of something very like pain. Then he softened. "And a place for those good warm fires in the evening. These trees, Will, these mountains."

I knew exactly what he meant. I didn't *have* to stay here, when they brought me back from the dead, from the void. I could have taken the next ship back in, but I chose to remain on Candle.

"So, how long you planning to stay this time?" I said.

Thomas walked on through the morning. The sun was about halfway up the sky, red in the east. A little wind began to kick up, to play with wisps of snow. This was more like Sarah—playful, sometimes tricky, but never dangerous, never deadly. I was ever more convinced that there was a bug in the system, and none of the rat day, rat wind stuff had been Sarah's doing. The day had been more like a mean-ass sneaky city rat, anyway, rather than like a wild but free country rat of the kind that Sarah might have known first hand and projected as her mind formed Candle's weather. Well, even if somebody *had* been messing with the weather, Sarah was back in control again now.

"I don't know how long I'll stay," Thomas said vaguely, paying attention to something else. "Maybe I'll settle down."

He looked off to the side of the trail, stopped, then shrugged and kept on walking. I looked also, but I didn't see or hear a thing.

"Then maybe Doom'll appoint *me* Wanderer," I said.

"You'd leave Candle's wind behind?" he said with a smile. He knew a little bit about Sarah. "Not likely."

Somewhere in the woods, snow fell from a limb. Thomas stared intently into the forest gloom.

"Some kids out playing?" I asked quietly.

After a moment, he replied, "Yes." He didn't sound very convinced.

We went on without talking, and the breeze picked up. Sarah loved moths—the bump of them at night, their softness against the hand, their mute, intense desire for light. The zephyr surrounded me like the cool beating of many moth wings. Snow began to sift down from the sky like butterfly scales, just like Sarah's breath used to feel against my bare skin. Snow caressing and then stinging, like a shrill voice calling from a great distance through a thick blanket of atmosphere. *Or like a breathy, whispered warning.*

The leaves rustled more loudly, and I tried to fit a stronger wind in with Sarah's personality, finally decided it was just some utilitarian function, a compensation for somewhere else that demanded calm weather. Frank Oldfrunon had a habit of taking late morning strolls, and a worse habit of using his status as mayor to override weather programming for his own convenience. When I first started the *Cold Truth*, I'd thought this an outrage, and editorialized about it a couple of times stridently enough. But everybody liked Frank, and nobody really minded that much, so I let it drop.



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But it was not the wind; the leaves were crackling but it was not the wind that stirred them.

"There's someone to the right," Thomas said softly, "I'm afraid—"

Then they were upon us. I saw a brilliant yellow flash, then red and green. Parkas. The air around me suddenly crackled and the world got more blue. Then I felt the most unsettling wrench I'd ever known in my life. My feelings of surprise, fear, a small edge of anger—all of them, all at once—were yanked into my complete consciousness like a knife being unsheathed. I heard a growl, all around outside me, and, impossibly, a growl *inside* my mind as well, a growl which was completely alien.

Raej. Coming into being around Thomas and me.

My brain rang with the beginning of the growl, and the world suddenly got *more intricate.* That is the only way I can possibly describe it. Everything about me took on a deeper texture, became more complete. I watched, almost hypnotized, as some men came running toward me. They shimmered and shifted in space like bits of glass in the barrel of a kaleidoscope. Their faces were burning like the sputtering wicks of candles. I have no idea how I knew they were male. There was a third figure, nearby but not moving toward me, whose face also glowed, but steady and bright, more like a detonating fuse than a candle wick. Somehow this meant femininity.

I'm seeing the world like a goddamn impressionist painter, I thought. One of the men had something in his hand that burned like a blue-green jet of lit propane. The man's own bright redness swirled down his arm to join the thing in his hand, meeting in a white hot glare where they joined, looking like one of Van Gogh's "Starry Night" stars.

Then the man hit me over the head with the propane jet. The pain told me that it was actually something very solid, like a blackjack.

I felt the jolt of Raej leaving my mind, of my vision of the world returning to normal. What I saw was the ground coming up to meet me. Flashes of light that accompanied a head-splitting pain. The beginnings of Raej's roar. Two sets of legs beside me. The roar stopping, cut off like some switch was flipped. The rushing of air from my lungs as I slapped into the ground. Thomas falling beside me. My own surge of anger. Then another crack of wood against my skull, curiously distant. Then nothing. Then hands on my shoulders, pinning me down. I turned, bit a hand, felt a loosening, and rolled free. Only to sit up with a pistol pointing between my eyes. Too much. Too much to handle. I raised my hands to my temples and cradled my head against the throbbing pain. I sat very still for a while, with my eyes tightly closed. When the throbbing subsided a bit, I looked around.

The man with the gun wasn't taking any trouble to hide who he was and I recognized him almost immediately. Hell, I'd run his picture in the *Cold Truth,* standing beside an ungainly piece of impressed sculpture. It was one of those artsy publicity shots, so the lighting was all contrasty and I had a hell of a time scanning it into the paper's template with my rather archaic hardware. Ran a little story about him opening his art



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gallery and bistro in the trendy part of Jackson—as much as a town of twenty-five thousand can be said to have a trendy part—something I do free for new businesses, hoping they'll think of me when they get established and want to advertise. The man's name was Kem Bently. Apparently, he hadn't appreciated my services.

Two other guys were nearby, one holding his bitten hand and stomping around cursing. The other was grinning, uncontrollably it seemed, and holding Thomas down. He didn't need to. Thomas was out cold. A woman stood above him, dangling a nightstick from her hand. It had a smear of blood on it that corresponded to the bloodied bruise on the side of Thomas's forehead. The two guys I recognized as hired help at Bently's place. I'd never seen the woman before. Her hair was long, straight, and midnight black. She was muscled like a settler from some high-gravity world like Grendel or Tashitara. Dark-skinned—maybe Mississippian, but more likely just Amerind. She looked like a bad-ass broad.

Bently was tense, like he might get a muscle cramp from all the tightness in him. I just hoped he didn't get it in his trigger finger.

"You hit him too hard," Bently said to the woman.

"I know what I'm doing." She kept her eyes on Thomas.

"Morning, Kem," I said, showing him my hands were empty. I tried to keep the tremble out of my voice. "You still angling for a lower rate on your ad in Friday's entertainment section?"

This got him to crack a smile, and I felt a little safer, for the present. In fact, once he saw that Thomas was really knocked out good, but not about to die, he loosened up quite a bit and threw a swagger into his manner, reminding me of a terrier that has killed his mouse or bird or whatever, and keeps looking at you for confirmation and a nice pat. I'd have liked to pat Bently really nicely on the top of the head. With a good stout piece of hickory.

"Nestor Marquez isn't much of a sheriff," I said, keeping a smile on my face. "But even *he'll* bounce you off-planet quicker than a cleric quotes Trotsky once he finds out what you've done here."

Bently just winked at me. He turned to the woman, who was now kneeling over Thomas, efficiently rifling his pockets and pack.

She found what she was looking for in the inner folds of Thomas's cloak—a bit of hardened clay, about fist size. It was brownish-white, probably fired in one of the woodburning groundhog kilns the Indians used for their pottery. She showed the clay to Bently, who turned to examine it.

And I dove for the pistol. The guy I'd bit on the hand whacked me across the shoulders and the back of the head with his blackjack and I collapsed, holding my temples, trying to squeeze the pain out of my brain. I decided not to try the hero bit anymore.

Bently trained the gun on me again, then saw I was sitting on my rump, moaning, and turned his attention back to the clay. He took it, looked it over very carefully.

"That's it," said the woman. "Let's go."



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Bently didn't answer. He dropped the clay onto the ground and ground it into dust with his boot.

"Oh, *shit*," said the woman. She moved toward Bently, not raising her club, but she wasn't the sort who had to threaten. She looked ready to kill him.

Grin-face, the man who was holding Thomas down, shuffled uneasily, and watched the woman, but Thomas was out cold and couldn't take advantage. My guard didn't take his eyes off of me.

"Don't worry, Verna," said Bently, gripping the pistol tighter. "That was just his damned chocalaca pet. Indians carry them in the clay. This boy's too smart and too good to use clay for smuggling rhythm anyway."

"Well, you *could* tell me," said the woman. She eased back over to Thomas.

Not a lot of trust here, I thought.

Bently turned to grin-face.

"You don't have to do that anymore. Go get me the slurper."

The man, still unable to keep his face out of a taut grimace, went into the woods, then came back with a gray cylinder. Maybe it was just the name of the instrument; "the slurper," but that thing surely looked evil to me. The gray was black-gray, and the top and bottom were rounded, like a can bloated with botulism toxin. Grin-face handed it to the woman, Verna. She took it from him with a sneer, and turned it the other way around, like the fellow was some kind of idiot for carrying it wrong. As far as I could tell, there *wasn't* any up or down on it. But Verna did something, and the end she had up sort of retracted, leaving what looked for all the world like a pair of false teeth displayed on a little pedestal. But I'm from 2041 A.D. originally, and *you* don't know what the hell I'm talking about, do you?

"Wait," said Bently, and knelt down next to Thomas, putting the gun to Thomas's head. "You can wake him up now."

Verna turned Thomas's head sideways and put the two mandibles of the slurper around his exposed neck, right at the spine. I wasn't liking this at all, but couldn't see what to do about it.

Verna touched something, and Thomas shuddered, then opened his eyes. For a moment he tried to sit up, his eyebrows bunching and his gray-green eyes blazing. Then Thomas felt the cold of Bently's pistol and relaxed. In fact, he relaxed a great deal. As if he understood what was going on and would bide his time.

"Gonna relieve you of some contraband, Mr. Wanderer," said Bently.

"You don't know what you're doing," said Thomas, evenly, with resignation—like he felt a moral obligation to tell these people the consequences of their actions. "You're going to kill a woman by doing this. And maybe hurt a lot more people. Do you want to start a war?"

"Oh, the hyps will get their jangles, you needn't worry," said Bently, contemptuously. "Only from a different supply house. And I don't have many Indian customers anyway. You people have your little pets to jangle you instead."



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Bently sounded like some low-rez actor reading from a prompter pop-up. Thomas closed his eyes and sighed.

I hadn't liked the bastard when he first came into the office. Shortish, bowl-cut hair that was supposed to be some sort of mockery of the Clerisy, even though Bently belonged to the Church. Most of the bar customers on his side of town were Cell members, but I figured he just went to Cell for the business connections. Bently wasn't exactly oozing with social justice and heavenly virtue. Now, while I have my reasons for liking the local Clerisy more or less, there's no love lost between me and Managua—but Bently wasn't just making fun of priests. His whole attitude was one of amused contempt, hidden behind the put-on of an easy-going good old boy. He'd compared his inner vision to the world and found the universe wanting. Small town artists. I can smell 'em at five hundred paces, and they just get more rank the closer they get.

Verna pulled back her hair, and put her eye to the other end of the slurper. She touched something, and the slurper started making the noise from which it got its name, pulling the drug from Thomas and injecting it naked into Verna's optic nerve. So Verna was one of those soulless rhythm-techs who were the scourge of the known galaxy, at least according to the Westpac Steering Committee. Personalities so empty that the drug couldn't find a purchase in them, couldn't find a pleasure or fantasy they would want. I didn't waste any time feeling sorry for her.

But Thomas was another matter. I watched, and winced as the teeth dug into his skin. He felt no pain, I later learned, because the thing stung him with a local anesthetic first, but I didn't know that then. And the pain Thomas was feeling in his heart, in his soul, at that moment . . . there is no anesthetic for that anguish.

The slurping sound continued for about five seconds. Then the machine disengaged and retracted back into its engorged cylindrical shape. Verna stood up, looking intently at some gauge or something on the slurper.

"Prime fullsent," she said, almost in awe. "It doesn't get any better than this. Just like the real thing."

Then she closed her eyes for a moment and twitched a little, as if she were feeling around inside her own body. She opened her eyes again, held the cylinder up to the sunlight, as if that would help her read the thing better. She looked mighty perplexed.

"There's not any security. No A.I., no basic manacle loops. Nothing!" she said, almost to herself. "This is too easy."

Bently frowned, backed away from Thomas slowly, then stood up. He kept his eye on the Wanderer as he spoke to her.

"You can contain it, can't you?" he said.

"Sure. I'm stone, baby. And I've got better A.I.s than Westnet," Verna said. "But it'll be a job making this algorithm usable. I don't know what we've got here, but it looks potent as hell."

Now Bently smiled. Like a terrier will, before it humps your leg.

"Good. Excellent," he said, then turned to Thomas and me. "Gentlemen,



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you come by the gallery anytime for a free drink." He spoke to his goons. "Tie them up."

My guardian goon bound up our arms and legs mean and tight while Bently covered us with the pistol. They set us off to the side of the trail, up against an old sponge tree.

"I'm warning you, stinkard," said Thomas, using the worst of Indian epithets. "You're starting a war."

Bently just smiled.

"I'm just a simple businessman," he said. "What Indian is going to fight over some half-breed Wanderer's stolen firewater?"

"Let's go," said Verna, who was standing behind Bently. "This stuff in me is getting restless."

Bently just kept smiling at Thomas and me.

"By the way," he said with a sick little laugh, "Give Janey my regards, and thank her for a *wonderful* evening last night."

I didn't see Thomas's reaction to this. I was watching Verna.

Her eyelids began to flutter.

"Oh, no," she said.

Then she let out a scream, which began high-pitched, but deepened as it continued—it seemed to go on forever—until it ended up deeper and louder than I would have believed a human's lungs capable of. Somehow, that scream was familiar.

Bently spun around and shot her in the chest.

He looked frightened and amazed that he'd pulled the trigger, like he wanted to apologize, but didn't have anybody to whom he could say he was sorry. Apparently he'd loaded the pistol with flechettes, the burrowing kind. There was a muffled grinding noise, and Verna's chest arched outward and oozed a little blood through her shirt. She slumped to the ground. Bently stood over her, staring, not quite believing what he'd done. The goons had stopped in their tracks, and were staring at their boss like stunned children.

"Still time to get the rhythm out," he whispered. "Have to hurry."

He told the two goons to pick her up. They followed Bently as he left the way he'd come.

"Oh Christ," said Thomas, as soon as they'd gone crashing through the woods. He gave a violent jerk on the ropes, but didn't get free. "Damn them to hell, I've got to get Raej."

The wind began to pick up again, like Sarah was both urging us on and blowing about in impotent fury. What could she do, with air for hands?

Again he pulled at the ropes, and again they held.

In the woods, I heard a hover's rotors begin to chop. But this noise was masked by a huge deep-throated yell from Thomas as he pulled his hands free of the bonds. He left behind a good deal of skin and blood in the mass of ropes, but this didn't concern him.

"Thomas, the bastard said he stepped on Raej," I said, realizing how stupid that sounded.



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Thomas paid me about as much mind as he did to the cuts on his arms. He stormed off through the woods after Bently.

But the hover was above the trees now. It buzzed over me on the trail, turned down the hill, and was soon gone toward Jackson.

Thomas lurched back out of the woods, ran down the trail a little, then saw the speck of the hover just before it disappeared. His shoulders slumped, and he hung his head. If only Sarah were truly sentient, could *really* understand, I thought. Then she could bring down that fucking hover with one good swipe. But no. There were security routines that would always hold her back. And Sarah wasn't sentient anyway, just a moaning wind.

"Oh damn," Thomas said, almost in a conversational tone. "Oh damn."

I'd worked my own way out of the ropes by then, less drastically, and I came to stand beside him. It may not have been proper Indian etiquette for one man to put his arm around another for consolation in defeat, but what the hell. I put my hand on Thomas's shoulder, felt the quiver of a sob run through him.

What to say? Something was flashing red to the side of my field of vision. The memory-bank tell-tale. So I had it all banked, for all the good it would do us. That memory bank was just as incriminating for us as it was for Bently and crew.

"We can get more rhythm for Janey," I finally said. "Somewhere."

He looked at me sadly, with more care on his face than a thirty-year-old man ought to have lines to express.

"That wasn't just rhythm, Will."

"What?"

I tightened my hand on his shoulder, but he would have no comfort. He walked away, and my hand fell back to my side. A line of leaves whipped up nearby, as if Sarah had come back to check on us, like some hunting dog who has lost the trail.

"Some new copying equipment just came out. They had it on Etawali. Not many people know about it. It's sophisticated enough to copy a chocalaca," Thomas took a deep breath, shook his head in a cross of sadness and fury. "Raej volunteered to be morphed. For Janey. He was the rhythm I was carrying inside me."

For a moment, I did not understand. Wasn't the rhythm just a copy, not the real thing? Then I remembered Verna's astonishment at the copy's intricacy. *Just like the real thing.* I, too, felt a great sadness come over me. Raej could be copied, and recopied, made to perform like an animal in a circus act. I pictured the great and powerful bear-thing, chained with iron-logic, put to work inside the head of some addict to provide mental masturbation. A slave.

The day darkened, even though it was still mid-morning, and Candle's old sun, never much of a source of warmth to begin with, burned like white ice in the sky, seeming to radiate a chill rather than heat or light.

This world is so damned cold, I don't know why *anybody* would want



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to live here, I thought. All the warmth, everything, gets lost, or frozen, or stolen away by the chill.

"Oh, Raej, Raej," said Thomas to himself, to me, to the empty air.

And the wind picked up again, slicing through Canoe Hill's trees like air across a woodwind's reed. You almost might think it was a dirge.

## 2

On Earth, they count a house's age in centuries. So everything on Candle is young to visitors from there, and they laugh—but oh, so politely—at our ideas of what is historic. Even folks from North America, which always startles me at first. When I was going to school at Washington U. in St. Louis, I had a friend, Lukas Meyer, who was an exchange student from Germany. Now *I* thought St. Louis was *old,* with its brick houses and cobblestone waterfront. But Lukas had laughed, the way people from Earth laugh at us settlers nowadays. The house he grew up in in Tubingen, he told me, was over three hundred years old. And it was just a house, no historic landmark, no museum, nothing *special.*

I met a fellow from St. Louis a couple of years ago—worked for some Coast Guard contractor, I think—who couldn't get over all the historic markers we've got scattered around Jackson. I mean, their arch is nearly six hundred years old now, and is about the *newest* thing they consider a sacred memory of the past. But I returned the condescension when I told him that I'd covered the ground-breaking ceremony at Cahokia Spaceport. And did I cover the dropping of the A-bomb on Hiroshima? he wanted to know. For most Earthers, everything that happened more than fifty years ago seems to have happened all at once.

But settlers are fresh come into this world, both as individuals and as a culture. *Everything*, I mean, everything, down to the portable johns the first Westpac expedition set up over at Lufson's Well, everything has a damn plaque slapped on it, with a halfsent in it to tell you how much shit the founding dads and moms were full of. So what if we don't have a real history? We carved a civilization out of the ice, didn't we?—we damn well will have a past and purpose to justify us. Or something that looks mighty *like* one, anyway.

Janey Calhoun lived with her sisters in an "old" wooden house, with one of those plaques on it. It had that classic pioneer line to it, Frontier Revival it's called, modelled after what the founding families figured the buildings in the American West looked like back during the Westward expansion of the 1800s—except that the settlers of North America didn't have herds of bacteria to make the wood, or molecule-sized carpenter machines to peg everything together and maintain it. The result was that the oldest houses on Candle were stylistically old, but *looked* new, like some meticulously preserved historic structure. People lived in these structures, however, along with hordes of tailored biota and microscopic robots, which followed behind the humans to see to their needs and clean



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up their messes. Those of us who got here later, after building space was restricted by treaty with Doom, envied the rambling spaces in the old houses. But the founding families held onto them as if the houses were the last ecological niche left for their dwindling species. Some of those families certainly *were* dinosaurs, long past their time.

Hell, they should have put a historic plaque on the Calhoun family itself, let alone the house. Old blood, off the first ship, doers of great deeds. At least, the original Calhouns: Jackson mayors, Westpac reps, Indian negotiators. Nowadays, three sisters kicked around in the old house, whittling away, I figured, at the big pile of money and esteem that their grandparents and parents had shoveled up for them to sit on. Except for Janey. Janey actually earned her keep, and then some, making quilts.

"Go and stay with Janey," Thomas had told me as we came down off Canoe Hill. "Keep her safe until I come."

"And what will you do?"

"Go to Doom. Get some rhythm for her."

"From the Indians?"

"No, but they can help me get it."

"Don't do anything that will get you killed," I said. "That can't help Janey."

"*I'm* not the one who needs to worry about getting killed."

At the bottom of the hill, Thomas took the trail to Doom. Since the morning had started out fine, if cold, I'd left my hover at the office and walked to Canoe Hill from Jackson, about five miles. I jogged back to town, and, since the Calhoun place was closer than the office, I went there first.

I hated that house, no matter how much it reminded me of a Missouri farmhouse. It was sided with white clapboards and had six gables. The halfsent that marshalled all the microscopic house servants was copied off of Georgia Calhoun, the oldest of the Calhoun sisters. To say I didn't like her would be a gross understatement. Georgia and I took to each other pretty much like a bullet takes to human flesh. But I had to get past the house to get to Janey.

"Will James to see Janey," I said at the door. The house waited a good while to answer. The afternoon sun, though feeble as usual, was at a killer angle, bouncing off the little glass window of the front door and straight into my eyes. The house made no move to polarize the glass, even though I was squinting something fierce.

"Janey is under the weather this afternoon, Mr. James," the house said in a brittle, hushed voice, like nurses use at the hospital when they are simultaneously speaking to you and trying to get you to hold your voice down. It was vibrating the window glass as the medium for speech, and, with each word, a hot flash of sun flicked into my eyes. I have trouble remembering sometimes that these house algorithms have no more real intelligence than, say, your average pig—that they are really no more than pencil sketches of the full-canvas personality they're copied



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from. *Bitch* must surely have run deep in Georgia Calhoun, in that case, for it to come through so clearly in her house.

"It's very important for me to see her."

"Her rest and recuperation are equally important."

"My business concerns her recuperation," I said. I turned my head away and shielded my eyes from the glare of words about to be coming off the door.

"What, exactly, do you want with her, Mr. James?" said the window.

*Patronizing* bitch, at that. Maybe I had to put up with this shit from the *real* Georgia, but I'd be damned it I were going to take it from some half-witted amalgamation of all her most grating mannerisms impressed on a heap of historic wood and steel.

"Tell Janey I'm here, house, and I'll talk to *her* about it," I said. "And please use something besides this window to talk to me. Get this sun out of my face."

If a building can let out an indignant huff, that house did so then, but I got what I wanted in both instances. Apparently there was no human override to prevent it from accepting my direct orders—nothing but sheer contentiousness on the house's part. So I was allowed admittance with a curt "Janey will see you now," but that was all. If I hadn't known the way to Janey's sewing room, I could have rambled about that lightless house all day, for all the assistance I got from the housekeeper.

I stumbled through the darkness of the living room, where only a faint trace of light made it through a crack in the heavy curtains over the window, and promptly cracked my shin against some piece of furniture. I let out a yelp of pain, and heard a surprised gasp, nearby. My eyes finished adjusting to the gloom, and I detected the still form of a woman in the corner of the room, one hand over her mouth, the other hand holding a half-full glass of some dark liquid.

"Hello, Wrenny," I said.

Wrenny Calhoun said nothing. She turned suddenly and went out through a side door. I continued across the room and climbed the stairs. The Calhoun sisters were a strange lot. Even Janey. *Especially* Janey.

"Under the weather" was a nice way of putting her condition. Without rhythm, Janey phased in and out of rationality. Even though Thomas brought her the best-constructed rhythm he could find—and so, probably the best in the Territory—it usually started wearing off before he got back to Candle, and Janey started slipping. But Janey wasn't crazy, even without the drug. Janey was just *different*—not crazy.

She was feverishly working on a quilt when I entered the doorway of the sewing room, but when she saw me, she came up short.

"Will."

The sewing room was sparely furnished. Janey sat on a stool, with a little table in front of her. In a corner was a big wooden trunk. Janey wore a faded calico dress, more white than any other color, and supple brown moccasins that Thomas had probably given her. Her hair was at the red edge of brown, and fell to her shoulders unhindered. She seemed



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almost to blend in with the quilt she was making. Now, I know about as much about quilts as *you* do about twenty-first century America, but I can tell quality when I see it. Janey's design was not merely pleasing—in fact, you might not call it pleasing at all if you were in the wrong mood; there was an energy to the whorls and stars and lines of stitches, an intricacy. There was feeling in those blanket folds, and intelligence. Somehow, they seemed familiar to me. Janey's quilts sold on Earth, in a North Carolina gallery. And also down the street, at Bently's place, goddamn him.

Janey stared at me intently, as if she had newly realized that someone named Will James existed and that conversation might be held with him. Every time I saw Janey, I got the feeling that for her the world was somehow always new and surprising from moment to moment, and you couldn't ever tell what to expect.

"I saw the edge of something this morning," she said, "and I'm trying to work it in here."

She pointed to a section of the three-quarters completed quilt. "Gnawing, running, biting, pulling down, hunger in the gut like baby spiders eating out of their nest."

You had to get used to Janey doing this. There was usually a point.

The patterns on the quilt coalesced. They started to make sense. I cocked my head, moved around behind Janey, so that I was seeing the quilt over her shoulder. A line of geometries, scattered by a single, formless patch of brown cloth, criss-crossed with erratic, elaborate stitches. Should have looked like a mess, but instead it worked. I *recognized* what I was seeing.

"A rat," I said. "Feels like a scurrying rat."

"Yes. Yes. But a mean one."

"When did you get this idea?"

"I woke up with it. This morning—at dawn."

Then she glanced up at me, saw my concern for her intensity, and laughed one of those Janey laughs that let you know there was a real girl in there. She set the quilt aside. Janey was still disturbed. She didn't seem to know what to do with her hands, now that she wasn't working on the quilt. She bunched and unbunched her fists, as if she were kneading the air in front of her. With an effort, she reached down and smoothed her dress.

"Is Thomas coming soon?" she asked. "It's just about time."

She brought her hands together with force, and clenched them tightly, trembling a little, on her lap.

"He got here this morning. But—"

"I'm so glad. Georgia is shining bright, lately. Hard and bright, as polished candle brass. But there's blood too—a little trickle running out of the top, red over the brass."

"She's been giving you trouble again?"

Janey swallowed hard, then rushed on, as if the subject frightened her.



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"She's very disappointed, I'm afraid, in how I've kept up the Calhoun name. Wrenny is not much help to wipe away the blood."

Wrenny liked her bourbon neat and frequently. Though I hadn't really seen her in the gloom of downstairs, I'd seen her before, and knew her a little. Wrenny was a lush, yes, but she could surprise you with her wit and charm. She was absolutely useless at anything, however. She was also strikingly beautiful, at least when she was sober; she reminded me of the Parthenon—partially preserved and stately on the outside, but crumbling to pieces, I imagined, behind the façade.

Then Janey looked at me—I should say, looked *through* me, as if I were a curtain through which she caught glimpses of the day outside. She gasped.

"You're all bunched and twisted, Will! Cocked like one of Granddaddy's old pistols. What has happened?" Then, after looking me over again with intensity, "What's happened to *Thomas?*"

"He's fine." I didn't want to say more, seeing as how the walls had ears in the house, so to speak. Janey noticed my reticence.

"House, leave us until I call," she said, not taking her eyes off of me.

"All right, Janey," came that near-Georgia voice, deeper now, unlocatable. Probably using a loose floorboard for a tongue.

"Someone jumped us. They got your rhythm from Thomas."

"The rat?"

"Yes. No. It was some people, from Jackson."

Janey kept staring at me. I was getting uncomfortable, because I knew she was seeing things that I didn't necessarily want seen. Don't ask me how. Thomas explained it once, that first time he asked me to watch over them while he flashed Janey with rhythm that he'd smuggled in. But he explained it in that way Wanderers have of discussing what you'd thought were the most simple of matters, and, by the end, leaving you so confused that you wished you'd just asked them the time instead. Though, come to think of it, they could probably befuddle even the answer to that simple inquiry.

"Remember that raven in Poe?" Thomas had asked, in a low voice.

We were at my house, in the living room. I'd opaqued the windows, and Janey lay asleep on my worn couch. The blue flicker of Raej's presence surrounded her, holding her, Thomas told me, in a kind of dreamless state. Raej was able to interact with Janey very much like rhythm did, Thomas said; better even. Only then, seven years ago, there hadn't been equipment sophisticated enough to make a decent copy of the chocalaca so that the halfsent might stay with her throughout the year while the original Raej traveled with Thomas.

"The raven that won't shut up from saying 'nevermore'?" I answered, gazing at Janey's sleeping form. She was quite pretty with her auburn hair spread in a crescent about her face.

"Yes. For Janey, the world *is* that raven."

He sat in the chair next to the couch, waiting for the rhythm's ex-



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traction routine to bootstrap the drug out of the labyrinth of his own mental pathways, and pack it for shipment down his optic nerve.

"Like a starship captain talks about?" I said. "What do they call it? Seeing into the true world, hearing it speak?"

"No. Janey's different from all us travelers and Wanderers. We can barely hear the raven, and most of us half-believe we're making it up."

"Janey can hear it pretty loud?"

Thomas thought about this until I thought that there had been some kind of error, and that the rhythm had blown a fuse in there somewhere.

"It sits on her shoulder, screaming in her ear, and never shuts up," he finally said.

"And rhythm makes it shut up?"

"No," he said. "Rhythm keeps her from turning *into* the bird, and clawing all our eyes out."

He turned his head as if someone had tapped him on the shoulder.

"It's ready now," he said. "We'll both be unconscious for a few minutes."

Just then it struck me, as it has several times since, that I was an accomplice in a highly illegal act.

"Why do you do this, Thomas? Are you in love with her?"

Thomas considered this. "I grew up with her. I can't remember a time when Janey wasn't there."

And that was all he said. The rhythm was ready. He pulled up Janey's eyelid, and made the transfer with eye-to-eye contact. The two of them looked like they were exchanging the passionate kiss of lovers, with Janey in a swoon from her agitated feelings. Janey's hand trailed to her side and rested on a cushion of my couch, her fingers relaxing into a loose curl. Janey was beautiful in a way that neither of her sisters could match. There was no perversion of character to detract from, *her* beauty.

I suddenly felt like a voyeur, there in my own house. I turned away from the sight, embarrassed. When I returned, both of them were unconscious, asleep in each other's arms. After Thomas came awake, we did not talk about what had happened, or how he felt about it.

All mirrors and poetry, Thomas was. Sometimes I wondered if Thomas *himself* existed, or was just some whirlwind of leaves and twigs that the forest wind had kicked up.

And Janey? *Janey* surely existed, and was making me damned uncomfortable, I thought, as the silence continued and the woman peered into my soul. She'd done this before. I was not a frequent visitor to the Calhoun house—having to see Georgia most every time I came around took care of that. But Janey was no recluse, and she and I went out together occasionally. Well, I'll admit it: she was about the only woman I ever dated.

We'd even shared one evening of passionate, if confused, intimacy. Then I told her, or she somehow divined, about my long-lost Sarah. And there was always Thomas, our friend, overarching all that we did with the white constancy of the stars through which he traveled. Or was it



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the thought of *Thomas* that bothered Janey? All Janey had said when we pulled apart was, "I haven't done very well with relationships."

She hadn't said anything when she found out about Sarah, only looked at me with the utmost sadness. Now she was seeing, in her way, a different emotion in me—my worry for Raej, mingling with those memories of first kissing her, of first kissing Sarah. Maybe the feelings then and now weren't so different after all. Sarah. Raej. Patterns enfolding, twisting into our lives like vines about old stacked lumber. Then you grab the vines, and the lumber goes tumbling, clattering into a heap.

"Black paper ashes sifting down, down around you, covering you, Will. And the fire, low, but hot and angry."

I felt it too, when I reflected on my mood, on the knowledge of what I had to tell her about Thomas and Raej, about the probable hopelessness of the situation. And, as much as the gentleman side of me said not to, the reporter in me had to ask her about that statement Bently had made, about thanking Janey for last night.

Then the door to the sewing room swung on its hinges, and from the squeak came the voice of the house.

"Pardon the interruption, Janey, but Georgia is here and wants badly to see you."

The door kept rocking back and forth on the hinge in order to complete its request, and each squeak made my teeth grind even harder together. I cannot abide an unoiled door.

Janey relaxed a bit, took her gaze from me.

"Tell her in a minute," Janey said. "And stop trying to annoy Will with that door."

"Very well," said the house, this time from a board almost directly under my feet.

Then, before I could say more, the house spoke again.

"Georgia says she must see you immediately. She's on her way up."

Janey began to fold the quilt she'd been working on. She did this meticulously, but quickly.

"Georgia thinks I'm quite crazy. That my quilts are crazy," she said. "And you'd better go, Will."

"Janey, I hardly think—"

"Georgia's mad. I was with a man, yesterday. Georgia found out."

"It was Kem Bently, wasn't it?" I said.

Janey was genuinely surprised by this. As if she hadn't even known herself who it was until I said it.

"Yes, that's who it was. Here, in the house. I went to the gallery yesterday and—"

There was concentration on her face and she was rocking slightly, chopping the air with her hands, the rest of her very still for a moment, as if she were carefully trying to impose order on a scattering of objects in front of her, to force coherence on her thoughts.

"You men—with your wants dangling from you, burning in



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you . . . Sometimes I scarcely know what I'm doing when I'm out of rhythm. What I'm becoming."

Janey wasn't paying any attention to me now, just talking to herself. She darted to an old trunk in the corner and fumbled with the catch.

"My sister is a woman of honor. It's a morning-glory vine in her, twisted around a metal trellis."

"Janey, we have to get you the drug," I said, moving to help her.

Finally, I got the trunk open, and Janey flung the quilt inside, then slammed it shut. She spun around, looking wildly at the door. We could hear Georgia's high heels now, clopping up the stairway. Janey's hand found mine, squeezed. What is going on? I wondered. Georgia Calhoun *was* a dragon lady, but Janey's fear was excessive. Almost like she saw Georgia as some kind of monster, coming to eat her. *Almost like she could see Georgia's monstrous soul.*

"Disappointment in *me*. She despises me. It hangs from her honor-vine like scarlet blossoms, Will."

Georgia was at the top of the stairs.

"Bleeding blossoms," Janey whispered.

"Janey Calhoun, I should have known," said Georgia, standing in the doorway, very still, not entering. "Another cheap . . . *tryst*, and in the *house*, again, Janey. In *my* house."

"Ma'am, I—" I said, but Georgia shot me a withering look.

"And with a *transmission*," she said, pronouncing the double 's.'

"Georgia, everything is quite innocent," I said, trying to sound as reasonable and mature as I could. I was, after all, five hundred years her senior.

"I think that you had better leave, Mr. James," she replied, looking at me now with a hatred I had only seen between, well, between Clerisy bigwigs and separatist Indians.

I had known there was a certain amount of prejudice against my type, a kind of gut belief that you couldn't really make up a complete human out of instantiated gamma broadcasts. And I was from the very beginning of the Broadcast era, the mid-twenty-first century. Among the first twenty people in the old Radio Corps, as a matter of fact. Many of us hadn't *quite* made it. Take Sarah for instance. So I was doubly suspect.

Nevertheless, I knew in *my* gut that I was just as human as the next guy. Georgia had the worst attitude toward us radio personalities that I'd ever come up against. But I was damned if I was going to let her treat me like a halfsent.

"I will leave when Janey asks me to," I said, with a hard voice and an empty smile.

Georgia came into the room.

"House," she said. "Call the sheriff."

"Gladly," said the doorhinge.

I'm going to have to report my own arrest in my own goddamn paper, I thought. Georgia stepped to the side, motioned me out the door.

"No!" said Janey. "You won't. House, you won't do it."



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"House," said Georgia quietly. "Do as I say."

For a long moment there was no word spoken. Then the house's voice filled the room.

"I am owned jointly by Georgia Lee Calhoun, Wren Warren Calhoun and Jane Kildrey Calhoun. As per my legal containment algorithm instructions, I must consult Wrenny Calhoun to break the deadlock—"

"And *Wrenny,* she says that if you call the *police*, they are liable to find her nice little stash of duty-free hooch that her star captain friend is so kind as to drop by on his rounds about the Milky Way," said Wrenny, who leaned against the doorframe. She spoke with the rushed, willowy voice of the very drunk.

"House, you are under *no* circumstances to call the sheriff," Wrenny said. She attempted to put her foot down firmly, but lost her balance slightly and sloshed the drink she held in her hand down her arm.

"Wrenny, you are drunk," said Georgia, her tone as flat as an overcast sky. Georgia turned back to Janey, and that sky flashed with lightning. "Janey, ask this man to leave."

"He's not wrong, Georgia. He's not dark and moist like the other one. He's bright sunlight on water. I'm better today, I promise."

"Ask him to leave."

I could see that Janey was becoming very upset. I must be getting really angry, too, I thought. The room was beginning to blur, as if I were looking at it through a sheen of tears.

"Georgia, I'm sorry you hate me so," Janey said. "I'm so sorry."

I felt my legs begin to give way. I looked down.

*Oh shit. My feet are melting.*

My feet were spreading *out,* like a pat of butter on warm bread. This wasn't right at all. For a moment, all I could think of was that Poe's raven had come to life and was calling out the end of the world like some croaking trumpet.

I leaned over and put my hand on the old trunk, to steady myself. What had been age-hardened wood gave way like the bark of a sponge tree.

"Nonsense, Janey. I'm your sister. I love you. I only want what's best." Georgia sounded like her throat was full of phlegm.

"Georgia, I don't want to hurt you," said Janey. "I'm *going* to hurt you."

I remembered what Thomas had said about the raven clawing our eyes out.

Georgia turned to Wrenny, rather desperately.

"It's one of her attacks. She's having one of her attacks. Help me calm her down, Wrenny."

But Wrenny just stood there, tottering back and forth, laughing nervously. I looked at Janey. She stood staring at her sister in anguish.

"I'm quite out of rhythm," she said. "Georgia, I'm quite out."

Georgia moved toward Janey, but the nearer she got, the more fluid her motions became. Her skin began to run like syrup. I looked at my



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own hands. They were peeling slightly, as if they were covered with wet scabs sloughing off.

And I'd figured that *Thomas* had the hard part of the bargain, going after more rhythm. At least he wasn't going to be the victim of a metaphysical meltdown. Or was he? Maybe the range of this was planetwide. Hell, maybe Janey was bringing the whole *universe* down around us, although I suspected not. Wrenny did not seem to be affected. Whatever the effect, I knew the cause. Georgia Calhoun.

I caught Janey from the side, before she saw me. Janey is tall, but thin. I picked her up in arms that felt like rotten wood, and ran from the room. I slipped and took most of the stairs on my butt—it felt like I was leaving part of my butt behind on the staircase, too—but I got up and out the door as quickly as possible. Janey had no softness to her at all. She wasn't melting. Evidently, she was immune from her own effect.

I ran down the street to the corner, where there was a small town park with a plaque commemorating some original settler structure or another. I set Janey down on the plaque and backed away. After I got about ten yards distant, I began to feel myself tightening up, coming back together, the way water must feel as it freezes in a container.

The plaque ran away from under Janey in a thin brown stream, and the ground around Janey slumped inward a good two or three inches. Then Janey began to cry, hard. I was mightily tempted to go to her, comfort her. But I figured it would be better in the long run for her state of mind if I didn't disintegrate before her eyes like an old-time leper. So I kept my distance.

After a while, Janey stood up.

"It's all right, now, Will," she said. "Come and tell me what has happened to Thomas."

We sat in the park, on a bench that had been next to the melted plaque. Its middle was curiously bowed. I pulled off my parka and wrapped it around Janey. I turned up the thermostat in the sleeve of my long underwear and was tolerably warm. The day was pretty mild for Jackson in autumn—maybe in the upper thirties. We are almost at the equator, after all.

"You tell *me* what happened just now," I said. "Should we call a doctor for your sister?"

"You got me out in time," said Janey. "People take a long while to boil away. When you turn off the heat, they go back to normal."

"You've done that *before?*"

Janey looked at me in surprise. Then a sorrow came over her, and she turned away.

"I killed a man that way. I thought I loved him."

She touched the edge of her eye, as if feeling for a tear. There was none there, so far as I could tell.

"He tried to hurt me. Then he just boiled all up," she said. "And yesterday. I almost boiled the one away yesterday—"

"You remember now, all of what happened?"



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"Oh," she said. "Oh, no. His face, like an old pumpkin . . ."

I was beginning to be glad that Janey hadn't spent the night with me that one time.

"When I get like this, I spin and spin."

"And you grab hold of whatever can stop the spinning," I said.

"I forget how the world is, and it starts falling apart."

"You used Bently's needs to hold things together, but there was a price."

"He *wanted* things, and so I wanted them too. But they were bad and they upset me. Everything started to fall apart."

"Georgia came in."

"Yes."

"And he left. Things went back to normal, and you didn't remember."

"Only what Georgia said had happened."

We sat there a long time, staring at the white space on the concrete slab, where the plaque had been. Evidently, the information algorithm they always put in with those things had been wiped out along with the historic marker. The ground was silent.

"We have to get you some rhythm, Janey," I finally said.

This broke her reverie.

"What happened to Thomas?"

I told her about the morning. About Raej. First she said, very quietly, to herself, "Raej." Then she spoke to me.

"And where is Thomas now?"

"He went to Doom," I said, my mind just beginning to really work again. Had I gone soft in the head along with the rest of me? "To find a way to get more rhythm . . . Janey—" I could not stop my train of thought, "that is weird-ass shit you do. Newsworthy, even."

Janey stood up, walked toward the park edge, stopped at its perimeter. She didn't seem to hear me.

"All this is my fault," she said.

Then she sniffled, sobbed a little.

"If only I could find a way to poke out my eyes, not to *see*."

"Janey, your eyes are beautiful," I said, not catching on too fast. Her beautiful eyes were tearing up now.

"It's the *seeing* that softens the boundary, you know, that lets things leak in and melt away. In the true world, what you see is that you become."

I'd heard Wanderers and ship's captains talking about what they called the real world—our everyday world—and the true world, about phenomena and noumena. About the Effect, and how it let you cross the boundary. It was the way that first the Mississippian Indians, then Westpac settlers had travelled to the stars: build a mental envelope outside of space and time, stamped with and made from your captain's consciousness, then mail it through the true world postal service. A few weeks, or months, or years later—depending on the denomination of the captain's stamp, his agility at thinking his way across the galaxy—the letter



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will arrive at its destination, light-years from where it started, a metaphysical trick on the universe performed by that clever prestidigitator, humankind. But Janey was talking about the opposite, about things from the true world trying to come into the *real* world. She seemed to make it happen with alarming regularity.

"Go ahead and put me in your paper, Will James," Janey said. "I can see that's what you want."

I walked to her, turned her to face me, keeping my hands on her shoulders. She felt so frail beneath the calico dress, like a small bird, quivering.

"My strongest desire is for you to be happy and safe, Janey. How about trying to fulfill that one?"

She was startled for a moment, then she smiled. I'd seen that smile before. First, a couple of years ago, when we'd kissed, touched one another. Before that, I guess you'd have to go back five hundred years or so, to another girl, this one from Oregon, whose hair was just this color, caught the light just this way. I really shouldn't have kissed Janey. The timing wasn't appropriate, but nothing bad happened. The wind quickened a bit, and ruffled her hair fondly, as if she were a child. The wind. And five-hundred-year-old memories lit the edges of her hair with more radiance than Candle's old sun could ever provide.

"Will you come with me to my house?" I asked. "You can't go back home today."

"I'll come with you."

We went first to my office and picked up the hover. With some guilt, I set the paper's algorithm to work by itself on assembling the afternoon *Cold Truth*. Then I took Janey to my house. All the way there, she held my hand very tightly.

I don't live fancy, and though I could afford it, I couldn't get a house like the Calhouns' even if I wanted it, what with land use restrictions in Jackson. My housekeeper is mute, efficient, and discreet. It's a stock model based on some very proper gentleman's gentleman from a long ago era on Earth. My house is pretty tidy, because I don't spend a lot of time there to mess it up. It's full of old comfortable furniture. Nothing fancy or valuable. But good stuff. I splurged on the bedframe and had it brought out from Earth. It had been mine, a long time ago. The mattress is made from the leaves of a native sponge tree. Nothing in the universe is so perfect for resting the human body upon.

We kissed again after the house let us inside.

"I really need something to hold on to," Janey whispered. She kissed me harder, with a directed desperation.

It was very still inside my house, and I heard the rustle of the parka Janey was wearing. It sounded like wind blowing through tree branches.

"I think we'd better stop," I said, pulling back. She kept a strong hold on me. I gently loosened her tight hands from the shirt of my thermal underwear.



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"When you understand who I see when I look at you," I said, "you are going to get upset again."

"Sarah," she said.

"Always."

"I think I'm going crazy," Janey said. She went and sat on the couch.

"You just see the world differently. You know that."

"No, I think Georgia is right. I think I'm losing my mind."

"What do you mean you think Georgia is right?"

She reached into a pocket on a fold of her skirt and pulled out an impressed letter, coded on that blue plastic lawyers and doctors use.

I walked over and gently took the letter from her hand. I went back to the bench, sat down, and activated it.

The visual in my head was of a prim man, with very straight, brown hair, parted nearly in the middle, bowl-cut just above the ear, Earth style. I inverted my perception, the way those letters let you do. The man froze in mid-throat clearing and receded to the back of my perception. I watched Janey. She sat on the couch all bunched together and tight, as if she were an animal ready to start at any disturbance. My house is safe, I thought, and she will be all right. I turned my attention back to the letter.

The man had tanned skin—much too tan to have gotten it on Candle, unless he'd had it done cosmetically. His voice was nasal, as proper as his looks.

*Dear Georgia,*

*Of course I remember those good old days at Emory. The parties in Atlanta, the raft trips down the Chatahoochee. And I with the very embodiment of the old State on my arm in its pretty namesake. I can only hope that those colonials appreciate the refinement and civility with which they were blessed when you returned to the stars.*

There was more of such stuff. I hadn't known Georgia had been sent back to Earth for her education. That fact explained much.

*In answer to your questions: yes, there seems to be a problem. Janey appears to be an ill woman.*

More blither about the inadequacies of Territorial physicians to treat complex cases. Then he came down to his preliminary diagnosis.

*The house-videos you sent to me show Janey exhibiting far-ranging emotional swings and incoherent speech patterns. Combined with the past history, which you reported, they suggest she may be very ill. I won't trouble you with the details, but I suspect she has what is known as Borderline Personality Disorder.*

Fortunately, he continued, the condition was treatable through his program at Bryce Hospital in Tuscaloosa. He was sure that Georgia would want the best care in Westpac for Janey, and Bryce was the place for it. There was just the matter of Janey's informed consent, and passage to Earth, and he'd be happy to admit her to the program. Then the picture was replaced by the shrink's signature—the Hippocrates snake, wrapped



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around a magnolia branch rather than a staff. Underneath was his name in frilly letters: Deason Allerby, PhD.

And then came a white sheet of paper, with a deep, comforting woman's voice reading the message. All I heard was the first three words:

ARTICLES OF COMMITMENT

"Jesus Christ, Janey! She wants to put you away."

Janey shot up from the couch and stood quivering, like a startled deer.

"It's cold in here," she said. I heard the house kick in the heater. My house was always the gentleman, and very unobtrusive. "I'm flowing farther away every day, farther away into the dark." My house, unfortunately, didn't have a remedy for that. The closest it could get was clearing the front plate glass window, letting the afternoon light stream in.

"You *are* sane; you just need the drug," I said.

"You've seen what I become. I can hurt people."

How could I answer her? I'd *felt* what she could do in my own body. And she said she'd killed a man, and almost did it again yesterday to that son-of-a-bitch Bently.

On the other hand, I hear just about everything that goes on on the surface of this planet, and quite a bit that goes on out in space comes in over the wire service. I hadn't heard of any unexplained deaths caused by some metaphysical disease. Only the usual kind, brought about by ignorance, accidents, jealousy, greed. It was greed that had me worried now—not about Janey, but her sister. I had a notion of what Georgia was up to with trying to browbeat Janey into signing those commitment papers. Old Stephen Calhoun, Janey's grandfather, had been given Honored Man rank among Doom's Indians for helping them negotiate some treaty or another with Westpac. A parcel of land automatically went with this title. And Indian land meant one thing nowadays: Loosa clay.

Found nowhere on Earth, completely owned by the Indians in the Territory, it was worthless, red stuff . . . except for one property. It was complex enough, in its natural state, to store sentient algorithms dynamically in a very small space. Programs big enough to run a city could move and breathe inside a clay ball the size of your fist.

It was the perfect medium for transporting information to new worlds. And perfect for smuggling rhythm. The Indians refused to sell it.

"Janey, who got the Indian property when your father died?"

"Me," said Janey. "I go there and work on quilts sometimes."

My house made the harumphing, throat-clearing noise that it used when it wanted to get my attention. Whatever it was could wait.

"Well, Georgia wants it," I continued. "For the clay. This thing that happens to you is not a mental disease. You don't need to be in an institution."

"Maybe yes and maybe no," she said with a smile—as rational a smile as I've ever seen. "But Georgia. I love Georgia. But something *inside* her, something that's scared, that's hungry. *That* could be what wants me to go away. It's a little cockroach, peeking in and out of her honor-vine."



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"I can see that plain enough in the real world, Janey," I said.

Janey took back the legal plastic. The light coming in through the window flickered, as if a large object had just crossed the face of the old sun. I figured it was Sarah, playing with her clouds. The house made the harumphing noise again.

"Clay," said Janey.

A human voice, raised in a vaguely familiar cry, came from somewhere. I looked around. The house opened the door, and gave a great, long throat-clearing, like some put-upon, extremely proper English butler. Janey and I started outside. Halfway across the living room, I remembered where I'd heard that cry before: the Indian games at Gathering. A war-whoop.

"How curious," said Janey, stepping through the doorway, looking up into the ice-blue Candle sky.

I realized what Thomas had meant when he said that the Indians would help him get some rhythm.

There were about fifty canoes, each with two warriors paddling on either side, making their way through the afternoon sky, heading east. They were two or three hundred feet off the ground, navigating over swells and buffets in the atmosphere as if they were traversing a lake. A hundred Indians in the sky.

Thomas had raised a war party. The first to be seen on Candle in a generation. Tomorrow's *Cold Truth* would be a hell of a read.

I began to realize how the first settlers must have felt when they saw the sight for the first time. I felt a bit of it myself. I'd never seen so many canoes together before. It was wonder. Awe. And, if they were headed for *you*, fear.

I knew who would soon be feeling the terror in this case; if he was stupid enough to have gone back to his Bistro and Art Gallery. Yes, he would be there, certainly, maybe still trying to extract Raej's algorithm from Verna, attempting to contain it. Thomas would have made sure that he was there before bringing the warriors in like this.

After the canoes had sailed farther east a bit, I could see some of their occupants. There was Thomas, near the lead, with another Indian in the canoe. Without Raej, he had to resort to the two-man travelling mode. He was paddling intently, too far away for me to make out the expression on his face. But I knew that if I were Bently, I would run, I would hide, I would do anything to get away from him, to keep from looking into that tattooed Wanderer's face, into those tumbling-dice eyes that were rolling out my future.

## 3

What I haven't told you about yet is what I know about Thomas and Janey. They grew up together, before Thomas forsook Jackson to go and become a Wanderer for his mother's people, in Doom. Thomas's father,



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old Jeremiah Fall, and Janey's mother, Margaret Dillard, were also close as kids. In fact, most everybody assumed that they would marry—which they *did*, only to different people: Margaret to Rex Calhoun, and Jeremiah to Metay-andi, Sun-sister of Doom. Some said that Margaret regretted her choice until her dying day, that Jeremiah had offered and she'd refused, settling instead for the security of a Calhoun. I never found out what the truth was. By the time they netted me down from out of the starry sky, Jeremiah's and Metay-andi's son Thomas was in training with his uncle, Herbert Sandle, to be the next Wanderer of Doom.

I actually met Janey first, when I decided to buy out the *Cold Truth*. The Calhouns owned a part-share in the name—the newspaper had stopped publishing years ago, done in by the Jackson *Clarion*, which was in turn bought out and put under by the Westnet *Daily Local Editions*. Damned daily locals were run by unsupervised halfsents and printed month-old news and whatever line the local elite fed them. They've destroyed many a good planetary paper. I was still fighting Candle's—ad dollar by ad dollar. Anyway, I would have handled the whole thing through a lawyer, but Georgia balked when she found out that I was a transmission. So I had to talk personally to Wrenny and Janey and convince them what a nice guy I was.

The money wasn't a problem. The *me* that remained after my copy was broadcast into space left about two thousand dollars in a trust fund for me when he died. When *I* died. In 2107. The principal grew substantially in five hundred years. I could probably buy the Calhouns out completely, if I'd wanted to. I am rich by Earth standards. But all I wanted was the paper—and I was determined to get it.

I thought Janey was nice enough when I first met her, if a bit flighty and difficult to get a handle on, with the quaint images that interlaced her speech. She reminded me of spring in Missouri. I told her I was interested in making a real newspaper for Candle, not just a p.r. sheet for Jackson. She said that if I really wanted to cover all the happenings, I should get to know the Wanderers, particularly Doom's Wanderer.

Herbert Sandle and I didn't hit it off too well. He was a separatist, a follower of the old ways. So I ended up taking his apprentice out for a beer. And began a long friendship. I am a pretty lonely fellow when you get right down to it, and there was something similar in Thomas. Both of us did not *quite* belong to our chosen culture, and never could, no matter what we tried. Thomas had renounced just about all the Westpac upbringing he could. But he never could forget the English language—or Janey Calhoun.

At first, I thought it was love . . . then, when I found out about the rhythm Thomas smuggled in for her, I figured it was a parasitic relationship, sex for drugs, that sort of thing. But Thomas could find somebody to screw for much less trouble than that, and, the more you got to know Janey, the less you could believe that she was that sort of woman. Sometimes I figured that all Thomas wanted to feel for Janey was broth-



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erly love—sometimes I just couldn't tell. But Thomas always came back, year after year, to bring Janey her drug.

I knew, in a vague way, that there was some factor I was missing, something that was present between them which I didn't understand. I always watched them carefully whenever I was with them, trying to puzzle it out. One thing was clear to me: Thomas was often tender with her, but sometimes he was brusque—like the way he'd been determined to go to Doom first, this morning, instead of going directly to her. I believed Thomas was fighting a war in himself over his feelings for Janey.

She was a part of everything he'd given up: arrogant, democratic Western society, animated with the frenetic energy of an electrified corpse, moving with only material purpose, containing no soul. But she was *also* just Janey Calhoun, who had somehow come into an uncontrollable sickness—or power—which Thomas was uniquely suited to help her understand and direct. He was a Wanderer; he spent most of his life journeying through the true world. He also went everywhere in the real world, and knew where to get his hands on the best rhythm in or out of the Territory.

Until I saw Georgia dripping like a melting wax figurine, and started getting all squishy myself, I didn't really understand what the rhythm was *for*. People who got jangled with rhythm (dancers is what they usually call themselves) used the drug basically as a personal slave. Rhythm is usually copied off some human being, chained up with security loops and pain/pleasure algorithms, and told by the overseer program that it had better find ways of making its host happy if it knows what's good for it. When you flash it down your optic nerve, it goes to work in your brain, without remuneration, working frantically, intelligently, finding ways to pleasure and stimulate you. The better quality the rhythm, the longer it lives, and the less side-effects you feel from its death. But it always dies, from the feedback and the wear and tear.

As far as I could tell, for Janey, the rhythm didn't provide the direct cause-and-effect link between cerebral cortex and pleasure center that usually established itself in dancers. It didn't give her multiple mental orgasms, like it did for the tease dancers, or let her experience getting to the top of Mount Everest without the climbing, like it did for the exotic dancers and armchair travelers. The drug just gave her some very complex, organized process to hang onto. It kept her from generalizing, from spilling out of herself and affecting the world around her. Well, let's call a spade a spade: it kept her from turning all of us into primordial goo, is what it did.

So it was this strange love-need relationship between Janey and Thomas that was driving the desire that pushed the Indian canoes toward Bently's place. It was this bond that was about to start a war that could maybe inflame the whole Territory.

"Rain clouds, black with thunder," Janey said. "Red heart flames burning in them like lightning."



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"The Indians are on the war-path," I said. "I have to cover this for the paper, but you have to stay here, Janey."

She wasn't paying attention, but kept looking up.

"Thomas," she whispered. She started to follow the canoes. I could feel something soften inside me, and I don't mean emotionally.

"No, Janey. I promised I'd keep you safe. You can't do anything about it."

As a matter of fact, I was thinking just what Janey *could* do about it. I pictured men and buildings melting, streaming away, sloughing into nothingness. Maybe after a critical mass was reached, the whole thing would keep going by itself. Reality unraveling. Jackson would melt, untwist to chaos. Then Doom, then maybe all of Candle. Them maybe the galaxy. Maybe *everything*.

"If you follow, and get upset—and you *will* get upset—you may end up killing a lot more people than just that one man."

I could see that she agreed, but she was pretty unsettled right then. I resolved to get her inside my house and then to get the hell out of there. Janey clenched her fist, and then seemed to clench her whole body, struggling to stay in control. I bundled her in through the door.

The house obliged me by opaquing the windows. Janey sat on the couch, her jaw held too tightly to speak. The house rolled in a serving tray with water, some fruit, and what looked suspiciously like old-time smelling salts, though I couldn't imagine where the house might have gotten them. Janey reached for the water, and, with an effort, brought the glass to her mouth without spilling and drank half of the contents down.

"Promise me you'll stay," I said.

"Yes, all right," she said, with strain in her voice.

I kissed her on the forehead and started to go.

"Will."

I turned.

"Take care of Thomas. Help him get Raej back. Raej is more important than I am."

"I'll do what I can," I said, and left.

Other people were headed in the same direction as I turned my hover onto a main street. Lots of people were running down the sidewalks, and a couple of hovers passed me at breakneck speed. I popped up my notebook and activated my memory-bank on the run. I was a little worried, because even the enhanced human mind can't store, pixel for pixel, too many hours worth of stuff, and I hadn't dumped this morning's little encounter when I went by the office. It's not like I would be putting it in the paper, after all.

Jackson is a pretty town at sunset. The streets catch the red and shine like bloody roped silver. They are made of a matrix of silk, clumped together in unbroken lines, so that, to the touch, they feel like smooth, steel-hard corduroy. This texture causes a striated reflection that sparks and flashes as your position changes relative to it. The blood colors in



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the wood and stone of the buildings also reflect the sunlight, and everything glows with subtle gradations of red, as if all the buildings were flasks full of a fine cabernet sauvignon, and the streets ran with wine.

The sun burned bloody behind me in the western sky. I could picture Bently, hearing whoops and cries, straining to look into the sun, nearly burning his eyes out, seeing nothing but red brightness. Then, *some*thing. A speck. Specks. Moving with deliberation, moving toward him. Indians, coming down from the sky. Then maybe he'd hear the hum of atlatl spears streaking in his direction.

I heard a muffled explosion off to the west, crackling through the late autumn air and echoing among the buildings—either gunfire or an atlatl tip. Somebody was using powerful ammunition, whichever it was. More explosions. I flipped the emergency manual override under my hover's dash to escape the town's speed damper. I'd just explain that I was chasing wild Indians, if I got caught and had to go to traffic court. I gunned the rotors and was at practically a ninety-degree tilt, roaring east down the silken streets. I saw the plume of smoke five or six blocks before I got there.

Bently's Gallery and Bistro was gutted. Firelight flickered through a broken window, where a "closed" sign hung on one string and twisted about in the updraft from the heat inside. The outside wall was blackened with several six-foot circles where atlatl spears had hit and exploded. There were many blast holes in the ground nearby, and a few spear fragments. A crowd was gathered around the gallery's entrance, in a rough semi-circle.

It looked at first like they were performing some religious ritual, but when I got there, I saw what they were looking at. Paintings, sculptures, one of Janey's quilts, all lay outside in a big pile. I wondered for a moment what the criteria were for saving a piece. Indians, I knew, had a strange aesthetic. But apparently they'd just dragged everything out.

Some of the people were picking through the items. I didn't worry too much about anything getting stolen. Not on Candle. It seemed like when we went in for crime, we did it on a grand scale, or not at all.

One man had his back to the gallery contents and was looking up into the western sky, his whole body shaking with rage.

"Fucking red cocksuckers!" he said, over and over.

A woman nearby was crying hysterically. A couple of other ladies, older, were not helping matters by trying to get her to tell them what she'd seen. What was more ominous to me were several clumps of three or four people talking in low voices. I looked at their faces, and didn't see just surprise and bewilderment, but active hate. And two words permeated the crowd, worming their way through the afternoon as voice after voice spoke them: Indian massacre.

I ran past the citizens of Jackson, around to the side of the building, and into the Bistro entrance. There was a low crying echoing through the rooms, punctuated by an occasional shriek. The house halfsent was burning to death. I found Verna, stretched out on a long table, her chest


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clotted with blood, her body stiff as a board, dead for hours. I felt the wooden door to the gallery: hot, the edges beginning to darken.

"House," I said, not having much hope that the halfsent was still coherent. "Is there anybody else in here?"

"Oh, God, to end this way," whispered a voice. "Flames, flames, licking my wounds, burning up my life blood."

Christ, I thought, he's got one of those poet amalgams for a housekeeper. A very bad poet.

"Where is Kem Bently, House?"

"Gone, everyone gone, taken by men, their skin like flame, flame in their eyes, burning me, burning. O captain, my captain. You are gone. Your words, your touch."

I wondered, briefly, exactly what *kind* of relationship Bently had *had* with his bistro and gallery. Then the house let out a bloody, unaffected scream, and all was silent.

Bently and his helpers, I figured, were probably on their way to Doom, trussed up on the floor of a dugout canoe. Unless Thomas had gotten the rhythm back. Then they might be dead. If not, they might wish they'd burned with the gallery; Mississippian Indians had the quaint custom of torturing their war prisoners. I got the hell out of the dead bistro.

And ran right into Mayor Oldfrunon, Sheriff Marquez, and Unit One of the Jackson Fire Brigade and Rescue Service. The big fire hover circled overhead, like a huge, inverted dragonfly, spraying water from its splayed legs down onto the gallery roof, which was rimmed with the blue-hot sheen of burning shingles.

"See anybody in there?" said Janet Kreel, our fire chief. She looked very much like she wanted to dart in and save someone. Firefighters didn't get to do much of that around here, what with the spark-proof polymer coatings on buildings nowadays. It usually took a concerted, intelligent effort to get a whole structure burning. The Indians had done a thorough job.

"I saw a woman; she's already dead. The house said there was nobody else."

Nevertheless, Kreel was set to lead a group in with her for a quick search, when something—probably alcohol—exploded, sending a blast of scorching air rushing over us, and setting whatever wasn't already on fire ablaze.

"Figuring out how Indians think is as hard as whistling when your spit's froze, but *damn*. Just *look* at this," said Frank Oldfrunon, as we watched the last of the roof trusses crash into the blaze below it. "The people who live around here are really worked up about it. They want blood, I can tell you."

"I figure it was a private matter between Bently and the Mississippians," I said.

Oldfrunon looked at me for a long moment. "That's what you figure, huh?"



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"You know I can't leave it at that," said Nestor Marquez. "There's laws. I've got to answer to those people."

There was an even bigger crowd now than before. Marquez had two of his deputies keeping the crowd back and the other standing guard over the pile of artwork, putting out the occasional spark that landed on the pieces. The sides of the structure fell inward, creating a big bonfire centered about where Verna's body had been. I popped up my tell-tales. I was still getting all of this banked, with about fifteen percent storage space left.

"I'm too old to fight a war," said Oldfrunon. "Guess we'll just have to stop it before it starts."

"Nobody wants war," said a voice behind us, rich and deep, like strong Colombian coffee. "The Clerisy is at your disposal, Frank. We'll be happy to do all that we can."

I knew without turning that it was Gerabaldo Corazon, the Directing Priest of the local Clerisy indwelling. I was sometimes amazed at how quickly Corazon turned up when there was some way for the Clerisy to worm its way into a situation. He was a man with such a bright and shining end burning before him that it blinded him to the means he might use to achieve it—a potent combination of old-time Bolshevik and Jesuit. But I didn't necessarily disagree with his interests; if it hadn't been for Clerisy pressure a few years back, us transmissions might still be headed out toward the Milky Way's long arm.

The Clerisy was not officially a part of Westpac, though plenty of Westpac citizens, including about a third of Jackson's population, were Cell members. Oldfrunon didn't draw a great deal of his political support from that one third.

"Baldy, so help me, if the Clerisy makes this situation any worse than it already is, I'll personally kick your priestly ass," said Oldfrunon, without even turning around.

Corazon and Oldfrunon hated each other from way back. I never heard what specific atrocities they'd committed against one another, but I knew what caused the general mistrust: Frank Oldfrunon was a territorial expansionist from the cradle. As far as he was concerned, Earth was like the dead heart wood at the center of a tree. Only the outer cambium of humanity was truly doing anything worthwhile to keep the tree alive, and to *stay* alive, we had to keep growing.

On the other hand, allegedly carved into the heart of every priest of the Church of Liberation and Global Justice was a fervent desire that we direct our efforts (and our cash flow) *inward,* toward social justice and spiritual wholeness (overseen by the Clerisy, of course). They thought it was a big mistake that we had ever left Earth in the first place, and a *really* big mistake that we ever had any dealings with Mississippian Indians.

"We only want to help," said Corazon evenly. "But just remember, Frank, a good percentage of Jackson belongs to the Church. And poor Mr. Bently was one of them. People saw the Indians drag him away



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kicking and screaming. At least before they hit him over the head with a tomahawk."

Corazon's tone didn't change as he recounted the Indian actions.

"At least he got one of them before they got him," Corazon said, growing dramatic at the end, his voice hinting at the political consequences.

"What?" I said. "An Indian was killed?"

"Bently and the others that were with him shot one before they were overrun. Franz Wasal—he's a lay-reader for us and he owns that hover repair place across the street—he saw it all."

"I'll want to talk to him," said Nestor Marquez. "But I think we all know what I need to do next."

"Goddammit," said Oldfrunon. "I'm going with you."

"As will I," said Corazon. "Mr. Bently is, after all, one of my flock."

Marquez looked at them both for a moment. His mind was none-too-fast, and his police blotter had as much spice to it as plain tofu, but Nestor had a notion about what he'd be up against, and that it wasn't just a matter of law and order anymore.

"All right," he finally said.

"You're sure as hell not going to exclude the press," I said. "I'll get there one way or another, you know."

"Jesus fucking Christ," said Marquez, "all right."

He called up his hover, and we were in the air in ten minutes. I flicked off my memory bank to conserve space, figuring I could just write things down until I needed to switch back on. I spent most of the flight over to Doom looking for a pen, cursing myself for letting my software make me lazy and forgetful. Candle's below-zero night cold set in as the sun went down, and it was pitch dark when we got to Doom—without hope of brightening, because Candle has no moon. I really missed the parka I had given Janey. Electric underwear is no substitute for a good down jacket.

Doom is the oddest combination of stone-age and space-age clutter you could ever see. Kind of reminds me of pure quartz crystals, embedded this way and that in a crust of granite. Most of the culture dates back to the 1200s, when the Mississippians first figured out the old faster-than-light trick, and took to the stars *en masse*. But they haven't been slow to assimilate whatever Westpac artifacts they've since found useful or admirable, either.

So there were dirt-floor wigwams with Westnet dishes on them. There were religious sunpoles at every corner, with carvings of snakes and that ubiquitous hand with the eye in its palm, proclaiming the divinity of their priest-king class—and doubling as supports for 500-watt arc streetlamps.

Beside most of the wigwams, wrapped up in worn skins and rags against the cold, working by porchlight or lantern, men and women burnished canoes with battery-driven polishers, repaired wigwams with hammer and nail, carried water in plastic jugs. They did not look up as



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we passed them, took no notice of us at all, as befitted their classes. Because, of course, they were stinkards and slaves.

If you want to picture it all, think of ancient Egypt, with the Jews milling about doing the dirty work, while the pharaohs are inside watching television.

"Exploiting despots," muttered Corazon. "History will deal with them one day."

What did you say to this? The Clerisy was completely opposed to dealing with a culture with indigenous slavery, and the Mississippian Indians had had a slave class since before they all left Earth, long before Columbus had even arrived in North America. So why doesn't Westpac, in its infinite wisdom, mow down the masters, free the slaves, and put all the survivors on special reservations to keep them from ever keeping human chattel again? Didn't we try something like that *before?* Goddammit, I didn't like slavery any better than Baldy Corazon.

And you're wondering why Thomas Fall was all fire mad about his chocalaca, Raej, being made into a rhythm slave, when he positively supported slavery among his own people? All I can say is that *Thomas* didn't own any slaves. And a rhythm program is much more complete than a halfsent program. You fully experience your bondage, and you never sleep, never have a free moment. You work for your host every *second* of your sorry existence. Being copied for rhythm use is a fate not even an Indian Noble would wish on a stinkard. And believe me, most of them despise stinkards.

"I suppose the best chance of finding Bently will be in the Gathering Hall," I said.

When we got there, I was pretty sure I'd been right. There was a guard at the entrance—armed with atlatls. The spears that were notched into the throwing arms were not ceremonial, however, but were those quaint guided missiles the Indians had adopted for weapons since their first contact with Westpac civilization.

A council fire's smoke rose thickly from the roof hole. Wedoweeta, the Trickster—my favorite constellation—shimmered in and out of existence as the smoke roiled upward, dimming and blotting out a vertical swath of stars. Bet you're having a laugh today, old boy, I thought, then wondered if the Coyote was a male or female, or both. Thomas had pointed it out to me, years ago, but I never asked him about the gender. Do males or females love strife more? I wondered. Because strife was what we were going to get, and I suspected that the smoke wafting across the twinkling stars was a kind of laughter at human folly.

From inside the Gathering Hall came a shriek of complete terror.

Indian cries, male and female competed with the scream, as if they were empathetically suffering some horrible torture along with their victim, or urging him on in the expression of his pain.

"*Do* something, Sheriff," said Corazon.

Marquez stiffened his shoulders, and walked forward. The three braves guarding the entrance came to alert. When Marquez got five feet or so



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away from them, they swung their atlatls around, aiming straight at his mid-section. Even Nestor Marquez figured out mighty quickly that these Indians weren't bluffing. He backed off.

"I have a semi-automatic in the hover," he said, as if it were a statement of fact completely unconnected with our present circumstances.

"Not an option," said Oldfrunon.

"A man is being tortured to death in there," said Corazon. "I should think your wonderful Westpac technology would give you something you could use to put a stop to it."

"Stun fields. They use them on Earth to stop rioting and such," said Marquez.

"Well?"

"Don't have one."

Another scream from inside, with accompaniment.

I was beginning to put two and two together.

"Gentlemen," I said, and walked toward the guards.

They lowered their atlatls for me. I popped up a phrase book I'd programmed in with my other reporter peripherals just in case I'd need it, but even unassisted, my Loosa wasn't too shabby. Granted, Loosa was just a trade pidgin, but Indians on a hundred worlds conversed, argued and—when it failed them—went to war using it. Come to think of it, maybe Loosa's inadequacies were to blame for all the warring Mississippians seemed to do. Whatever the case, it got me through the guards.

"You know me," I said to one that I recognized, Lalay Potter. He'd been the other brave I'd seen in the canoe with Thomas during the attack. "I'm Thomas the Wanderer's friend. Let me through."

They debated it a moment, then motioned me past them, closing behind me quickly so that none of the others could come. Lalay followed me in. I was in a little alcove, with a thick, wooly skin hanging over the door to the main room. Around its edges came the yellow flicker of bright firelight. The entranceway to the outside had no door, but the alcove was hot. It must be sweltering inside the Gathering Hall.

"I'll get Thomas," Lalay said, and went behind a corner of the skin-door.

"Well," I said, as Thomas pulled the skin aside and stepped into the alcove. "So."

Thomas was stripped to the waist. He wore pants made of some sort of leather, and moccasins. His hair was matted with sweat and something darker than sweat trickled down his face, through the tangle of tattoos, to drip from his chin. His chest was covered with curves and whorls of red welts, accented by a thin line down their center in ink. These were new tattoos.

"We don't go to war very often anymore," he said. "So everybody's getting highly decorated."

"So that's what the screaming is about."

"It hurts."

Thomas seemed to fill the alcove, and for a moment I was sure he was



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using up all my air. I was gasping for breath. Then I realized it was smoke from the Gathering Hall interior leaking through.

"Just what are you burning in there?"

"No English for it. Sipsi. Makes you see the future."

"Uh huh."

Thomas looked past me, into the night. "Marquez. Politicians?"

"Oldfrunon's here trying to stop a war; Corazon's here trying to start one."

"How's Janey?"

I looked carefully at my friend before answering. Even half-jangled, he had a sort of magnetism to him, a patina of mystery and, at the same time, weary cynicism, as if coatings of dust from all those worlds he'd visited had built up on him, layer upon layer, filling the wrinkles of his skin with a network of experience, working itself in, under, as full of order and information as the tattoos which covered most of his body. But the planet dirt, the dust he picked up between the stars, it all went deeper, anchoring itself into his soul, like lichen into rock, transforming him from a man—albeit a man between peoples, a natural outcast, but a man nonetheless—into some sort of statement, some long sentence the universe was trying to say. What do *you* say to such a creature? What does it mean to be its friend?

And, at the same time, he was also just Thomas Fall, who loved a woman in a way I did not understand, maybe could not understand. A woman I, too, perhaps loved. I didn't even know if he'd ever slept with her, or if he even wanted to. All I really knew was that he and I shared an easy manner when we were with one another, that I did not have to guard my thoughts so much when I was with him and, I believed, that he felt the same way towards me—so much so that he'd shared his greatest secret and his greatest weakness, this attachment of his to Janey Calhoun. I knew that he was confident that I wouldn't betray him, and that, if I couldn't go along with the course he had decided to follow, I wouldn't use our friendship as a weapon against him.

"Janey," I said, "needs some rhythm."

"I know," said Thomas quietly. "Come inside."

The Gathering Hall was big, even by settler standards. It was about a hundred yards long, fifty wide, and had a ceiling that stretched at least three stories above us. Firepots were burning at each corner, and a huge fire in the middle of the floor, with five men and women continually feeding it with branches and seeding in a gravelly stuff which I figured was sipsi. The Indians used this place for games and for audiences with the Suns, the ruling class, who were, in addition to being the heads of state, also the supreme court. And once a year, at this time, there was the Gathering, when the Wanderer returned from the sky with news and stories of all the scattered clans. Everybody came, ate, drank, and listened: slaves, stinkards, Honored People, Nobles, and Suns alike. I'd attended several in my time. But what was going on now in the Hall was no Gathering.



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I imagine that for Gerabaldo Corazon it would have been a vision of Hell—if he actually believed in such a place. As far as I could tell, most of the priests in the Clerisy held the turnings of history and the ethical evolution of man as their Deity. They didn't mention God much. Well, the Indians believed in a personal God, all right. One that occasionally enjoyed human sacrifices.

Most of the Indians sat in unkempt rows around the central fire. Directly in front of the fire, the tattooing ceremony was taking place, augmented by a kind of drunken dancing by the men who were the next in line. Working themselves up to face the pain, I supposed. They were all screaming as if they were being tattooed right along with the lucky Indian who actually *was* being tattooed. Next to the tattoo ceremony was a large pyre, on which rested what looked like a body wrapped all in cloth patterned with brilliant reds and purples. The Indian who was killed today. I clicked on my memory bank. The room was contrasty as hell, with brilliant purples and reds, and deep, velvety blacks. You had to be there. I could memory bank it all, but there was no way I could reproduce the full range of lights and shadows in that room. Nevertheless, no journalist that I knew of had ever gotten a glimpse of this ceremony, or of Indians in this frame of mind, so I had to try.

All over the floor, particularly up next to the walls, tattooed braves lounged, some still moving, some passed out, some intertwined with women or with one another. The air was stifling hot, and full of the sweetish sipsi odor.

"I've been looking into the future," Thomas said, leading me towards the far corner of the Hall. "No matter what road I look down, I see trouble ahead, stretching across the horizon, eating its way into us like gangrene."

I felt like I was walking down a set of stairs where each step was of a different height; I stumbled, caught myself, coughed. A purplish-red mist came out of my throat and formed into clouds before my face. It was moving, trying to form itself into images, faces. Goddamn sipsi, I thought, I don't *want* to know *my* future. I hurried through it, dispersing it with my hands.

Thomas laughed, as if he'd read my thoughts. Or maybe I'd spoken it aloud. Hard to remember, and my memory bank was recording things just as subjectively as I saw them.

"Well, even gods can have bad days," Thomas said, pointing to the man on the pyre. "The Great Sun went up against a machine gun."

"Your uncle?"

"Yes. He insisted on leading the attack. Died like a warrior. I wish I'd known him better."

"Who's in charge?"

"Nobody, until Sun-sister Metay-andi decides on a successor from among her children."

Succession is maternal among the Indians at Doom. If the Great Sun



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dies while his mother is alive, she choses from among his brothers. If she's dead, his eldest sister choses from her male children.

I looked hard at Thomas, put my hand on his shoulder, even though it made him flinch in pain.

"What do you see in the future, Thomas Fall?"

He kept walking.

"I don't want it," he said. "All I wanted was to get Raej back and get Janey her rhythm—then tell my stories and go back out."

"But you used your status to get what you wanted."

"I didn't see any other way. Goddamn it, I'd have done the same if it were you. You don't let your friends be made into slaves. You fight. You sell your soul if you have to."

As he said this, he walked ahead, stopping at a large sack of potatoes in the corner. The sack stirred and I realized it was actually Bently. He looked up at Thomas, moaned, and sat up. His hands were bound behind him.

"Stand up," said Thomas.

Bently struggled to his feet.

"Shit," I said.

Bently wasn't going anywhere. The backs of his ankles had been pierced and thongs of leather run around his achilles tendon. One was tied off to one corner of the Hall, one to the other. If Bently moved much more than a foot, he would hamstring himself.

"Remembered anything new, Kem Bently?" said Thomas looking directly at the trembling man.

"I couldn't get it out of Verna," Bently said, then began to whimper. "I told you; I told you. Ask Shed and Hank."

"Shed and Hank can't tell me. I saw the slurper in your gallery," said Thomas, "And transmission equipment. Where did you send my rhythm?"

"Shed and Hank," said Bently. His eyes widened. I guessed that he was talking about the two goons who helped him jump us. Bently was fighting his facial muscles, which were trying to twist into a sickened grin. "They're dead, aren't they?"

Thomas gave Bently a sharp push backward. He stumbled, and cried out in pain as his tendon came up against a thong. Thomas stalked away. I gave Bently a helpless shrug and followed Thomas.

"Kind of cruel and unusual, don't you think," I said.

"I didn't string him that way. They'd already done it when I got here."

"And Shed and Hank?"

"They're tied up in my house, with a friend of mine guarding them from . . . accidents like what happened to Bently. They don't know anything."

"Things are kind of getting out of hand," I said.

Thomas didn't reply, and the smoke was getting impossibly thick. After a moment, I couldn't even see Thomas in front of me. The smoke was billowing now, hanging in thick clouds. I hurried to catch up. But my legs were melting, just like they had in Janey's sewing room. I flailed



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about, trying to catch something, to stop my fall. Indians crowded round me, their bodies slick with sweat, and I reached out to them, but my hands slipped away down their arms. I could feel the network of tattoos covering their bodies, and the tattoos were not drawings, but etched things, dug *into* the skin. It was like running your thumb over an old coin, but the ridges were not sharp enough, the skin-crevasses not wide enough, for even my fingernails to get a hold. I fell past them, into the mist, a long, long way. Then I slowed down, though still falling. A face formed in the red clouds, a woman's face. Sarah. She did not speak, but smiled at me wanly, like she had the day we parted. Her hair mussed, her lips sipsi-red from my kiss. She stepped into the transmission chamber. And stepped out again, copied, broadcast. Now it was my turn. Just a moment, the space of a breath, and we'd be together again. Like two lovers who pause at the edge of a pond, admire their reflections, then walk away to live the rest of their lives. But the *reflections* linger, like a rainbowed film of oil on the water. Until one of them is washed away. And the other finds that his soul is, in the end, just tar-black oil without her. Looking back, it was all so unutterably sad.

Then, gently, the floor came up to meet me. A strong arm steadied me. The red mist abated, but did not clear.

"Did you see the future, Will James?" asked Thomas.

I steadied myself, shook my head.

"No, the past," I said. "How do I get out of here?"

## 4

My memory bank filled up in the middle of the most secret and sacred ceremony that an Indian Wanderer is empowered to perform, which is just as well, because I would just as soon have torn up the Press Amendment to the Westpac Constitution as run pictures of the Calling of the Chocalaca, Raej, without permission.

But I can tell you about it.

We'd left through a back door, and, for all I knew at the time, Oldfrunon, Marquez, and Corazon were still at the Gathering Hall entrance, posturing and twiddling their thumbs. Thomas had a house which remained unoccupied most of the year. But when Gathering time came around, everybody in Doom pitched in to fix it up nicely, and stock it with provisions. Next to the house was a small, tightly built hut which covered a little outcropping of Loosa clay, and that was where we headed.

Thomas sat on a rough-hewn bench in the center of the hut, rolling a bit of clay between his palms, talking to himself in some Loosa-variant that I could not follow. It was nearing midnight and getting toward that piss-freezing point I mentioned. I stamped about, trying to get up the courage to go outside, into the biting wind, to empty my bladder before it was too late. Finally, I went out. I dropped the waistband of my long underwear just low enough and just long enough to do my business,



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wondering about the possibilities of frostbite, and pissed out onto the ground full of Loosa clay.

This clay was somehow necessary for the chocalacas' existence, and I knew enough about Wanderers to know that their chocalaca was essential to traveling alone, analogous somehow with the huge computers that starship captains were intimately linked with on their voyages through the true world. To lose your chocalaca in flight meant death, as surely as a computer malfunction would strand a ship in deep space, with nothing to do but drift until the air ran out.

In fact, *all* of the worlds the Indians settled on have substantial clay deposits. They couldn't have their solitary Wanderers without it. Sure, the Indians could travel without chocalacas, in a two-man canoe, with one man keeping up a ritual chant about the canoe's and its passengers' existence, and the other doing the mental work of forging *ahead.* But it took a two-man canoe months to travel the same distance that a star ship could travel in weeks—and that a Wanderer and his chocalaca could cover in a day. Some say that the chocalacas were always in the clay, that they, in some way, *were* the clay. Others said that they were a subconscious construct of collective Indian society. Not even the Wanderers were sure what was the truth.

One thing was for sure: Westpac scientists had noticed, in a big way, that Wanderers were the fastest thing around, and that this was somehow related to the clay. Nobody had quite figured out how it worked yet, but clay speculation was the hottest game on the commodities market. It was getting so that the stuff was too expensive to use for bulk transporting of halfsents anymore. But there was one thing (not spoken of, but always a consideration) that it still paid to ship impressed in Loosa clay: rhythm.

So settlers greatly resented the fact that, for all practical purposes, Indians owned all the clay. Back when everybody was first meeting each other, it hadn't mattered so much. We were all going to be friends, Westpac was going to make up for the shabby treatment of all the Native Americans who got left behind in the great exodus, or, more probably, were never invited in the first place. Western culture had progressed in thirteen hundred years, discovered certain inalienable rights—and common decency. It took a big gulp, sure, to swallow the slavery thing. But then we found out about the clay.

And Candle was found in the knick of time, and space: 500 light-years from Earth, the nearest substantial clay deposit. The first planet on which Westpac settlers had run into Mississippian Indians, who'd gotten there centuries before, the—until then—unknown first wave of emigrants from Earth. Of course, all this was a hundred years before my time, or five hundred ahead of it, depending on how you look at it.

So Thomas and I inhabited this knick of time, and were notched on old time's stick, standing at the finite meeting point of two infinities, past and future, precisely in the present, precisely and perversely at a


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logic gate in old time's flow chart, a point of forced decision, filled with prickly consequences. But ain't we always, all of us?

I finished pissing, then came back in, to find the interior of the hut bathed in a blue glow. The air smelled gamey, like I myself did after I'd been out backpacking for three or four days. Thomas finished shaping the clay, and put it back into the pocket from which Verna had taken the other piece. Suddenly, there was a flash that filled the hut, and Raej coalesced in the air around us.

Again I felt that alienness, that otherness, in my mind. A great restlessness, a need to be *out*, turning things over, looking into places. A bear's hunger. But for knowledge, for novelty.

"Chocalacas *eat* experience, don't they?" I asked.

The presence in my head—Raej—growled low and soft. It was gentle mockery, I somehow knew.

"It's a lot more than that," said Thomas, "but even I don't really understand them." Then, his voice in my mind, but not speaking to me: "How have you been, old friend?"

Raej let out a grouchy growl in reply.

"Thank you for coming back to me, after what I've done."

Raej didn't answer, as if the apology were completely unnecessary. After a moment, a huge roar filled the hut, and I felt an old anger in my mind, a hatred of something silver-red, almost transparent, empty—yet intelligent. Then Raej's flame died down and I felt him pull away from my mind like a great wave going back out to sea.

"What was that thing he's so mad at?" I asked.

"Don't know," said Thomas. "I know he hates that thing, whatever it is."

Thomas closed his hand around the bit of clay in his pocket, and closed his eyes, as if he were making a promise to himself never to lose it again.

"Now we have to get back the ghost of you that was stolen."

We walked back out, into the night, to try one more time to get Kem Bently to tell us what he'd done with the copy of Raej.

Halfway to the Gathering Hall, Nestor Marquez stepped from the shadows, his gun in hand. Behind him stood Oldfrunon and Corazon. Oldfrunon looked pained; Corazon looked pleased.

"Thomas Fall, you are under arrest for abduction and suspicion of murder," said Marquez. "And don't try anything with that pet of yours or I'll shoot."

Thomas just smiled. "I don't suppose I could tell you that I've renounced my Westpac citizenship," he said.

"Sorry, Thomas," said Oldfrunon. "Just checked the records. You never did anything legal about your citizenship."

"So, the half-breed is the only one you can arrest in all of Doom," said Thomas. "Well, you got your man."

We went to the hover. Marquez made no attempt to hide our exit from the slaves who were still out and about. Marquez and Thomas sat in the


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backseat of the hover. Marquez kept his rifle on Thomas and let the hover's computer drive. I sat across from Thomas.

"This is bad, isn't it," I said.

"They know where I am," said Thomas. "Metay-andi chooses at dawn."

"What the hell are you talking about," said Marquez.

"What you've got here," I said, "is the most likely successor to the Great Sun. The old man was killed this afternoon."

It took a second for this to sink in. But everybody knew what it meant. The priest-king of Doom wasn't just a leader, he was brother to the stars. The Indians *worshiped* the stars.

"Damn," said Frank Oldfrunon. "God damn."

Corazon was squirming around in the front seat, agitated as hell. All of this was just confirming what the Clerisy had been saying about Indians all along.

"Sheriff, I think you'd better have a force ready in the morning," said Corazon. "An armed force. To prevent a slaughter, a massacre."

"Or start one," said Oldfrunon.

Everyone was quiet while the hover sailed unerringly down the silk road to the Jackson jail. After Marquez got Thomas locked up, he was less concerned about Raej making an appearance and maybe scaring him enough to make him drop his gun. What he should have been afraid of was the chocalaca burning out his brain. But evidently Thomas had decided non-resistance was the way to go for the moment.

I was allowed to sit in the hall where Thomas's cell was. Hell, Nestor Marquez was barely noticing my presence at that point. He was a lot more concerned with getting the word out that the Indians were coming in the morning. He did this most effectively.

I picked up the day's edition of the Candle *Cold Truth* in Marquez's office and looked it over. Fluff and wire stories. Deadline for the *Cold Truth* was two o'clock; I ran an afternoon paper. I'd had nothing much that I could report on until mid-afternoon today, so my little algorithm gleaned what it could from the local halfsents and from the Territorial Wire Service. But the wire stories would, of necessity, be several weeks old, and halfsents were, well, half-sentient, and never quite got things right, no matter how much information they "knew."

Oh, I had faith in my algorithm; I'd built it up myself, from specially imported programs made of bits and pieces of a good cross-section of the great journalists since the mid-twenty-first century, back when translation first began. It's just that no software (or human being) can massage good stories out of sparse data. And the best data base on Candle, at the moment, was me. Tomorrow's paper, if I lived to put it out, would be a sight more lively and informative.

I went back to sit with Thomas and await the turning of our side of the planet back toward the old, red sun. Thomas wasn't talking much. He dozed occasionally, and awoke more than once with a startled cry. Along about three, Marquez came back. Janey was with him.



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Raej flickered into reality for a moment. A blue light filled the half-lit darkness of the jail hallway.

"He's here," said Janey excitedly.

Marquez pulled his gun.

"Keep that thing away or I'll keep it away for good."

For an instant, Raej flared, like the flash of paper when it hits a fire. Then he subsided, flowed away. Marquez lowered his gun, looked at Thomas suspiciously.

"What, and deprive you of your war?" said Thomas.

Marquez muttered some imprecation, then left.

"Why does there have to be a war? Raej is back." said Janey. Then she thought about it a moment. "Oh."

"How are you, Janey?" I asked.

"There was a long, white time at your house. Then I smelled the things your house gave me. Some colors came back."

Janey looked flush and rested. Apparently my dear old house algorithm had done a good job in keeping her calm and comfortable.

Thomas was standing now, leaning out from the bars of his cell, his hand extended.

"Janey."

She raised her hand toward his and his hand encircled her wrist. A blue spark passed from Thomas to Janey, a faint shimmering of power. Raej was among them, joining them. For a moment I looked at this tableau. You would almost think them a family. Janey's face was radiant; it had an expression of utter bliss. I began to feel embarrassed. What kind of contact had she and I had compared to this complete connection of intellect and emotion that Raej provided Thomas and Janey? How could I have doubted what they really felt for one another? Through Raej, Thomas and Janey were practically one person. I turned and quietly walked away. No one noticed me going. Marquez merely grunted as I passed his desk and went out the door, to stand in the deep cold of Candle's autumn night.

After my eyes got used to the moonless darkness, I could detect a very, very faint glow coming from one of the jail windows which looked out on the town square in which I stood. It was surely Thomas's cell. I thought about going back in, standing watch over Thomas and Janey, as I had before. But what possible business could I have in there now? Thomas no longer needed me. I'd proved indifferent, at best, in taking care of Janey. Christ, I'd almost taken advantage of her while she was in a weakened state. Some friend. And Janey had Thomas and Raej to keep her steady, and to keep the boundary between the true world and the real world solid.

When I was first broadcast, I'd thought: what a wonderful thing, to travel to the stars. What was most important, what was essential, was that I'd get to *see* the future with my own eyes. Maybe babies feel this way, tingle with some mute, innate yearning to get *out*, to explore. Then they find that you have to make a living in the out, make a life. At least,



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that was what I'd found out. Either that, or take a quick look around, and then kill yourself. Because the only way you ever really saw was to *do*. To see, to know, meant to live another day, to figure a way to stay alive and interested. That's all there was to it. But maybe I was not a babe, fresh from the womb of the twenty-first century. Can you yank a man from his culture, from everything that makes him what he is, and still call him a man? What was I contributing today? Nothing. Maybe I was like those cancerous skin cells that, shaved from the body, keep dividing and dividing into undifferentiated masses, useless. Merely a scientific curiosity.

Then there was snow on my nose, my lips, fluttering into my face like moths.

Funny the tricks the mind can play on itself. We humans have a most ingenious little algorithm packed into that gray matter between our ears. I thought I heard a voice. Her voice.

"Hush, Will, hush."

For a moment, I almost believed it. But all it could have been, really, was the sound the wind makes as it flows and ebbs along silent town streets. I stamped my feet against the cold, and went back inside. I stopped at Marquez's desk.

"Let her stay the rest of the night. I'll keep a watch on them."

Marquez scrunched his face up like he was about to deny my request. He looked at me for a long moment, then shrugged.

"You watch them, then," he said.

When I got back, Thomas and Janey were almost exactly as I'd left them.

"What will you do in the morning, Janey, when the Indians come for Thomas?"

"She can come with Raej and me," said Thomas, still looking at Janey intently.

"Do you want to do that, Janey? You may not be able to come back."

"I want to stay with Raej," she said.

"With Raej?"

But almost before the words were out of my mouth, I understood. I *knew*. It wasn't Thomas—or at least it wasn't *mainly* Thomas—whose return Janey awaited each year. Thomas was Janey's friend, yes, just as I was. Raej was something much more. Janey's lover?

Janey turned toward me. She still had that beatific air about her, but there was also a look of determination.

"I want to stay with my father," said Janey. "He always goes away. I want to stay with him for a while. I hardly know him."

I just stood there, in the hallway, for a long time, watching them. So it was not Raej who was the bond between Janey and Thomas. It was Thomas who was the bond, the conduit, for a father's love. And for a daughter's reflection of that love.

Finally, I spoke. "You're half-chocalaca, aren't you, Janey?"

"Yes."



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Then Janey smiled at me, as a friend. I don't know if a smile can really accomplish that much, but I felt better. Still awkward, slow to understand, but included in the world she and Thomas shared.

"This will make a great story someday, won't it, Will?" said Janey.

"This is one whale of a story."

So old Maggie Dillard, Janey's mother, hadn't been satisfied with her staid Calhoun husband after all. Perhaps Thomas's father, her old friend Jeremiah Fall, had had something to do with introducing her to her chocalaca lover. What a story! The first human-alien sexual encounter in human history. And the day I printed this story in the *Cold Truth* and betrayed my friends would be the day I hanged myself. But I got to thinking. The chocalacas had existed among the Indians for centuries, going back to prehistory. This was probably not a first. But I'd bet my poetic license that it was a first among Westpac settlers. A half-alien, misunderstood, fighting to find her place in society. That would sell some papers.

"Going to the Indians will solve the commitment problem with Georgia," I said. "But if you stay with them, Georgia gets the clay."

"Georgia's cockroach gets the clay."

"Yes. And maybe Wrenny's got more fight in her than most people give her credit for."

"I'll be happy to get away from that house," she said, very softly. "Even when I have rhythm, it's hard there."

"Raej helps you to control your mind while he's here?" I said.

"Yes, and Father and Thomas bring me rhythm for when they're gone on their trips."

"But a permanent copy of Raej would be better, now that that's technologically possible?"

"Yes," said Thomas. "Now you know. Don't print it, Will."

I was taken aback and a bit hurt.

"Is that why you never told me?"

Thomas looked at me and smiled. "I always trusted you. It was Raej who didn't want us to tell anyone."

"He told you that?"

"Not exactly. I . . . *felt* it. Until now. Things are coming to a head, and he probably thinks it's important that someone should know."

"That copy was transmitted from the art gallery to somewhere else on Candle before you got to Bently," I said.

"Something a lot bigger than a mugging in the woods is going on," Thomas said. "Raej probably wants you on our side."

"Or he's just a big old bear who's changed his mind. You don't really know what he *thinks*, do you?—or even if he *does*?"

Thomas's reply was a ritual saying among the Wanderers. He said it in Loosa. As close as I can get in translation and still get any of the multiple meanings is: "Chocalacas think otherwise."

Just before dawn, I called up the *Cold Truth* and dumped as much of my bank as I could over phone lines. All the sheriff's phone had was a



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standard optical flasher. I spent about twenty minutes transferring, and cleared out around fifty percent of my storage space. The paper's algorithm didn't say much. It was pretty much stunned by the load of information it had to start extracting news from. What I had left in my head was mainly the morning meeting with Bently, which would never make the paper anyway.

Outside, settlers were gathering. I could hear a large group milling around and, unfortunately, the clinking of what I was sure was gunmetal. As the sky lightened, I could see that Marquez, whatever his shortcomings, sure could network. No wonder he kept winning his sheriff's position every year by a landslide. It looked like half the people in Jackson were lining the streets nearby, speaking in low voices, passing cups of coffee from hand to hand, the steam rising in the deep chill of Candle's morning. Living silhouettes milled among the shadowy hulks of the statues of their dead ancestors which were interspersed across the town square. Like their ancestors, they were about to meet one of the lost tribes of the Mississippian Indians. It was cold, and Janey still had my parka. I turned my longjohns up full blast.

I have never understood why the Indians of Candle choose to worship its sun. Even at noon, the poor thing reminds me more of an inflamed pimple than a nuclear fire. You can't really look into the sun on Candle for very long—but certainly for longer than you can look into Earth's sun. And it seems to take a long time before you get retinal afterimages. Some days, at sunset, we all look at the swollen red thing going down and a sigh passes through everyone; it's kind of the way you feel when a crushed bug finally pulls its carcass into a crack so that it can die in peace.

But the thing keeps coming back up, day after day. And once again, on this day, the sun rose. I flicked on the memory bank once more.

And the Indians came, sailing across a still sky. Even Sarah seemed to be holding her breath. In the town square, on the pedestal platform of the highest of the statues honoring Candle pioneers, Frank Oldfrunon stood. He stood at the huge greened-bronze feet of old Stephen Calhoun, the first Westpac settler to meet the Indians. When Oldfrunon spoke, I realized that he had ordered Sarah to be still, to funnel and amplify his voice like a megaphone.

"Nobody do anything we'll regret," he said. "Let's wait and hear them out."

"Yeah, like they heard out Kem Bently!" someone yelled. But such was Frank Oldfrunon's presence (and Sarah's dampening of the challenger's words) that nobody moved.

Still the Indians came on.

There were no war cries today. They formed a tight circle above the town square, and one canoe peeled off and came down to where Oldfrunon was standing. One of the Indians in the canoe was Lalay Potter. He gave a great heave, and dumped Bently over the canoe's gunwales. Bently



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landed in a heap on the stone platform. He tried to get up, couldn't muster the strength, then sat back down, quietly sobbing.

"Give us Thomas Fall," said Lalay. Everyone heard it. "Give us the Great Sun."

Gerabaldo Corazon emerged from the crowd below and climbed up to examine Bently.

Oldfrunon loosened up before our eyes, the old, easy-going bumbler-of-a-mayor seeping back into his body like a spring thaw in ice.

"We can do that," said Oldfrunon. "Seeing as how you've returned our citizen to us. Nestor, bring him out."

Thomas walked out, straight and tall, before Marquez. Marquez had, wordlessly, allowed Janey to remain with Thomas. Maybe I *would* vote for the fellow if he ever came up for election again. Janey was wearing my red parka, which caught the red of the morning sun and seemed to glow. But the glow didn't only come from the parka. I could still feel the presence of Raej between Thomas and Janey, the barely visible flicker, which might have been mistaken for the redness of the parka, the faint trace of ozone in the air, but which could not be mistaken once you knew it.

Marquez had a sidearm, but it was holstered. I followed behind them. I was feeling the effects of lots of running around, and no sleep. The early morning chill sent an ache through my legs and I limped a little. When the Indians saw Thomas, they let out a great whoop.

As Thomas and Janey began to climb the pedestal, the sun rose slightly and painted Stephen Calhoun's granite face a deep red. Corazon stood up when we were halfway up to the platform.

"This man has been mutilated," he said, with a resounding, dramatic calculation.

Sarah amplified his voice through the streets. I felt her recoiling, the sudden dampening of the air about us. But it couldn't be that Sarah was understanding any of this, realizing that she was being manipulated. She had half a mind, the mind of an animal, cunning but not intelligent, mostly emotion. The instantiation engineers had told me this that first year, after I'd recognized her in the winds of a winter snow storm, after a hundred days of having her wrapped around me like some old familiar blanket.

We thought it would be better if you didn't know, they said. What we managed to recover is, to put it grossly, the right side of her brain. We can't even rescue elementary grammar functions. Still, she's complex. Perfect for inhabiting a large, extremely dynamic system. There's really nothing else we can do, and the town council thought that such a courageous pioneer of the Transmission Era deserved at least a sort of life. History and all, you know.

At least you can't slap a plaque on the wind.

So I actually wasn't feeling Sarah drawing back, I told myself, wasn't recognizing her dismay at being used by Corazon. Too much sipsi last night; too active an imagination.



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"Someone is going to have to answer for this," said Corazon, pronouncing each word separately, distinctly, like it was imperative he get the syntax right. Like it was some kind of code phrase.

And suddenly Sarah wasn't there anymore. I knew. The rat wind was back—a pack of them, yanking canoes this way and that, blowing sneaking bites of frigid air over the backs of the Indians. Canoes were tossed this way and that, while the Indians struggled frantically to maintain mental control. One pair of braves in a canoe lost it, and plummeted about fifty feet. Below them, settlers yelled and pointed rifles. Then the two Indians, paddling furiously, pulled out of their dive and leveled off. But the Indians weren't going to be able to keep themselves aloft for long, I suspected.

Through all the screaming, I heard a whisper. It was Janey's, who was standing very still, halfway up the steps to the platform.

"*No.*"

Gerabaldo Corazon stood in the rat wind, his face flush, full of a manic glory. Bently was seated beside him, laughing like a little demon familiar. Thomas ran the rest of the way up to the platform. Marquez started to draw his gun, and I cracked him in the back of his head with my elbow. I caught him as he slumped and gently set him down. Nobody noticed; they were all looking upward, watching Indians being thrown around the sky. Marquez had a very hard head, and my elbow was humming like a thwacked hornet's nest. I'd probably done more damage to myself than to him.

Thomas reached Corazon.

"Call it off," he said, almost spitting in the priest's face. There was authority in Thomas's voice, an undercurrent of deep power that came from a ghost-bear haunting his syntax. I couldn't have resisted.

But Corazon just looked at Thomas and smiled, almost benevolently.

Bently lunged at Thomas. His face was twisted with more hate than I'd ever seen in a human being.

But we are, after all, creatures of flesh and blood—and tendons. Bently's torn ankles gave out on him and, with a cry of pain and indignation, he ended up prostrate at Thomas's feet. He didn't stay there long, though.

A huge, nearly transparent paw flicked out toward Bently. Above and behind Thomas's head, Raej's big bearish face, glowing with blue-tinged flame, flashed into a snarl. The see-through paw had substance enough, though. It picked Bently up and flipped him over backwards, as if he were a log, with big, juicy grubs underneath. I hadn't known chocalacas could do that. Bently landed on his back, behind Corazon.

"Damn your holy ass to hell," said Frank Oldfrunon. "I *knew* you were up to something, Baldy. I just never thought you really wanted war. I should've never allowed you to ship that fancy equipment in. Algorithm upgrade! And I'm a goddamn suntan oil salesman."

"Call the wind off," said Thomas. Around him, Raej crackled and roared. "Stop hurting my people."



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Corazon's righteous calm began to crack at the edges. Thomas reached for him. I knew also to some degree what Corazon was feeling in his head, because I'd felt something of the same thing myself. Corazon was realizing that Raej could burn out his brain like a jet of propane igniting magnesium, in one swift, white-hot flash.

"If you hurt me," he said, "your little devil-pet gets disseminated to every world with a Clerical indwelling. We'll work it until its mind falls apart, begging us to stop."

Bently squawked. He sounded like a chicken a fox has just pounced on, betrayed past all belief.

"You told him! You *shithead!* After what I went through!"

Corazon paid no attention.

"That's right, Kem," I called up to him. "He used your sorry ass."

"They ran rawhide through my ankles!" Bently cried out.

"You made your sacrifice for History," said Corazon primly.

"Yeah, and now Corazon's told *everybody,*" I said loudly, putting the best derisive edge I could in my voice.

Bently was so enraged, he couldn't speak for a moment. He lay, gasping for breath in his amazement.

"You *told,*" he said. "It's all worth nothing."

"You were paid," said Corazon. "Now shut up."

And that was when Bently cracked.

"Paid?" screamed Bently. "I *believed.* I believed in your precious History. I used one woman. I *killed* another one. You fucker!"

"Shut the hell *up!*" said Corazon.

Again I heard Janey whisper.

"Stop it. Please, stop it."

Bently didn't need to use his legs to get at Corazon; he just rolled over, wrapped his arms around the priest, and dragged him down. They went tumbling down the steps of the pedestal, past Janey, who turned to watch them. On the way down, Corazon managed to get hold of one of Bently's ankles. He squeezed.

I had to jump to get out of the way. They rolled about five feet away from the pedestal's base. When they came to a stop, Bently was clutching at his legs, trying to dislodge Corazon. Corazon got both hands on the ankle and twisted mightily. Bently arched backward, completely lost in pain, and Corazon pulled himself up and darted away. I started after him, but my legs were stiff from supporting me all night and didn't respond well. I heard a powerful rushing coming from behind me, growing louder. Raej's paw crackled past me, after the priest, but the range was just too great, I guess, or Raej didn't want to risk hurting anyone else, and Corazon disappeared into the crowd, trailed by the tang of Raej's electrical passing. I was worried. Raej was doing lots of things, but one thing I was pretty sure he was *not* doing was keeping Janey calm. And *that* was what scared the hell out of me more than anything. Maybe Janey was not in range for the more delicate care she needed. Maybe Raej just had too much on his mind, even for a chocalaca.



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Returning to the edge of the pedestal, I felt my insides begin to lurch. I looked up. Stephen Calhoun was beginning to lean at a crooked angle against the sky. Apparently the shift wasn't great enough for the people standing up there to notice. Here we go again, I thought. There was nowhere to take Janey this time, no escape from the strife that surrounded her.

The rat wind blew on.

Some of the Indians had gotten back control over their canoes. They tried to land. Only there wasn't any space wide enough to avoid fleeing settlers.

Nobody knows who did it.

Somebody fired a shot.

An Indian's chest exploded. Without the two of them, his partner could not keep up the Effect. The canoe careened into a patch of settlers. Maybe it even crushed whoever fired that bullet. Indians who could pulled atlatls from the bottoms of their canoes, arming them with missile-spears. Settlers cocked their guns, took aim. Across a space of about a hundred feet I saw, unmistakably, an Indian taking a bead on *me*. There was nothing I could do, no time to find cover. I was about to get killed.

Then a voice filled the atmosphere, as soft as mist on a sea coast, as alive as a farm full of animals and growing things.

"Get out of here, rat," Sarah said. "Get on away."

The wind stopped short, like a dog that's reached the end of its chain. It squealed a little, straining.

"I'll sic the cat on you," said Sarah.

The rat withdrew quickly then, down the street of Jackson, sucking a trail of kicked up litter after it.

"Nobody's going to fight," said the same voice, yet it was another voice, and located just underneath where Thomas and I stood. Janey Calhoun came up the stairs, to stand under her great-grandfather's statue. "This all started because of me, and I'm going to end it."

Everybody heard her. Her voice came out of Janey, yes, but it was also the whisper of wind around the edge of the buildings and canoes—and the modulated tones of a breeze blowing over the ends of gun barrels. Sarah's voice.

Janey was crying, very upset. But we weren't all melting.

"You've spread out," said Thomas, almost in awe. "More than you ever have before."

"I found a strong rhythm to latch onto," she said. "She's always been there, but I never knew she was so strong. She wants to be whole as much as I seem to want to fall apart."

"She's there," I said, or maybe I only thought it. "She's really alive."

A gun cracked and a bullet sank into Stephen Calhoun's left knee. There was a puff of down where the bullet had passed through an edge of the parka Janey was wearing. Janey turned to look below her like some flame-faced goddess with vengeance on her mind.

"Damn," said Bently. "Missed." He was standing next to the sheriff's



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still-unconscious form, Marquez's pistol in his hand. "I'm going to kill that fucking Indian. There's going to be a war."

So it was Thomas he'd been aiming at, not Janey. The man was seriously losing it, but there was no time for me to get to him.

"You *knew* I wasn't well, but you used me to hurt other people," said Janey, quietly. But, through Sarah, Bently heard.

He steadied his hand, taking more careful aim—at Thomas.

Something ludicrous was happening. Bently's bowl-cut hair stood up on end, making a cup on his head, like the bloom of a tulip, if they'd had tulips on Candle. The morning grew dead quiet.

"You won't hurt people anymore," said Janey-Sarah.

At first I thought Bently had gotten his shot off, but no gun flashes like that. Most of the settlers instinctively covered their ears, so loud was the sound. Those near Bently were knocked flat.

Bently fell over, dead.

He'd been struck by a lightning bolt out of the clear blue sky; he lay on the ground, smoldering.

"Nobody's going to fight," said Janey again, still using Sarah's voice to be heard. Everyone hastily lowered their weapons, settlers and Indians.

"Now everybody go home."

A few people started to leave, some running in terror. A group picked up the four or five who'd been hit by the falling canoe. A couple of other people got Bently's body. Nobody touched the dead Indians. The settlers weren't moving fast enough for Janey, though. A quick strong wind kicked up, and people began almost blowing away, chattering like autumn leaves tumbling down a sidewalk.

"Indians, too," said Janey.

Thomas called out to the braves in the canoes in Loosa, directing a couple to get the fallen ones from the ground, telling the rest to go on back to the village, that he would be there soon. He motioned Lalay over, and the Indian readied his canoe for Thomas.

Thomas moved around behind Janey, who was looking out over the streets. He took her by the shoulders and spoke softly in her ear. Janey seemed to recede back into herself a little, and the slight trembling and tension in her body slackened.

Whatever contact, whatever symbiosis, Janey had had with Sarah, it was gone now. I knew Janey—and I knew Sarah. This was Janey leaning into Thomas's arms; there was nobody else there.

Frank Oldfrunon came up beside me.

"We've stopped it for today, Will, but if this girl can't keep up her magic act, I'm still worried. What's real is still real, you know."

I was silent for a moment, looking inward, checking my memory bank. Bently's ambush of Thomas and me was all still there.

"This afternoon I'm going to run a story that might change people's minds," I said. "And it will probably get me in a lot of trouble."

"If you can stop this war, I can keep you out of trouble," said Oldfrunon.


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"I've got more friends than you might suppose, me being the old geezer that I am."

"Then get that Clerisy indwelling sealed off as quick as you can," I said. "And don't let anyone in but Thomas Fall."

"I'll see to it." Oldfrunon went down the stairs, then stopped by Nestor Marquez. He shook the sheriff awake. Marquez sat up with a groan.

"Well, I'll let it pass *this* time, Nestor," said Oldfrunon. "But if I catch you asleep on the streets of Jackson one more time, you'll have to quit sheriffing and run for mayor."

Marquez, of course, did not reply. Oldfrunon led him into the courthouse, looking for all the world like an old prospector leading a mule.

A faint blue aura surrounded Thomas and Janey, and I knew that, at least for the moment, the real Raej was within his daughter's mind, soothing her, sustaining her.

"I don't think it will be a hard thing to get the rhythm back from the indwelling," I told Thomas.

He nodded.

"Lalay and I will go and get it. Do you want to come?"

I thought about it a moment. Maybe I should see all this to completion, get it all in memory. But I had a feeling the Clerisy was going to give the copy of Raej back lickety split, and just as quickly call Gerabaldo Corazon a renegade, like they'd done with that priest on Aeolus. One thing the Clerisy has known how to do since its early days as a heretical movement in third world jungles is to cut its losses.

Also, there was no question about it, today I was going to scoop the hell out of the Westnet *Daily Locals*.

"I'll stay," I said. "I have a paper to get out."

Janey pulled off my parka and handed it to me.

"Sorry about the hole, but you need this to stay warm, Will James," she said. Then she and Thomas got into the canoe with Lalay.

I had something I wanted to ask, something I *had* to ask, but I was afraid. I have skipped across time like a flat stone thrown against still water. I have seen the future. What have we made of ourselves? What have we discovered?

Clever people that we are, we've looked down the well of our own minds, taken a flashlight to the walls, and we've found, yes, that it's deeper than we thought, that there are other realities. But haven't we found that, after all, there *is* a bottom, dry and sandy, and that there's no water down there, no soul? Nothing but ashes, as we've suspected and feared all along—and that what we mistook for thoughts and feelings was only the sifting and settling of those ashes?

Welcome to the future, brave Radio Pioneer.

"Tell me, Janey," I said. "Does she remember me?"

Janey looked at me and smiled.

"She hasn't forgotten, Will James. Of course she loves you still."

I pulled on the parka, hugged myself against the cold. There is always



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the *possibility* that there's something real behind words and weather. It was enough to keep me going. It always is.

"Thanks for letting me hear her voice again," I said. "Even if it was just for a little while."

Janey didn't say anything. Raej's glow surrounded the canoe for a moment, followed by the papery crackle of the Effect enfolding them. The canoe rose into the blue air, and turned toward the east, toward the Clerisy's indwelling, and disappeared into the sun. I watched for a while, as the faint light struck my face, warming it just a little. No, worship is just not the proper relationship to be in with Candle's star. Something less grandiose seems more appropriate—something more like friendship. I stood in the old sun's friendly morning glow for a long time, among the statues of the dead pioneers, and listened to the whisper of the wind. ●

## NEXT ISSUE

(From page 109)

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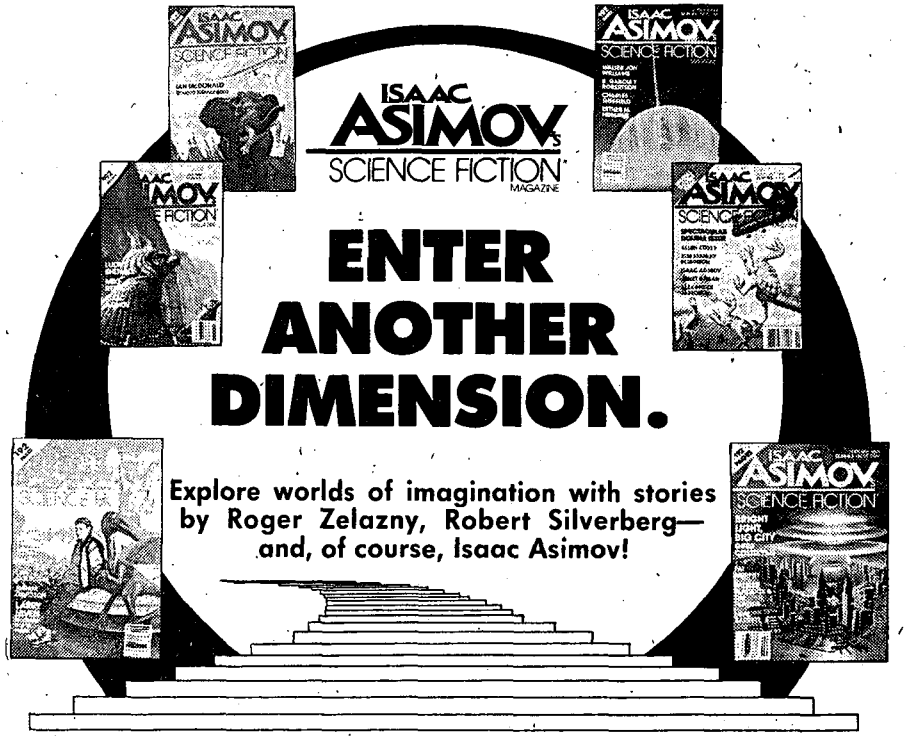
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# ON BOOKS by Norman Spinrad

## UTOPIA

**The Folk of the Fringe,**
**Orson Scott Card,**
Phantasia Press (5536 Crispin Way, W. Bloomfield, MI 48033), $22.00 (hc); Tor, $4.95 (pb)
**Earth,**
David Brin,
Bantam, $19.95
**Pacific Edge,**
Kim Stanley Robinson,
Tor, $18.95

There are those who trace science fiction's roots back to Plato's *Republic*. Though the utopian novel of the nineteenth century is clearly one of the literary precursors of SF, and indeed even though early Gernsbackian "scientifiction" was utopian literature of a technocratic sort (nicely exemplified by Gernsback's own *Ralph 124C1+)*, the utopian science fiction novel has always been something of a rara avis in the modern genre.

This seems rather peculiar in light of SF's central thematic concern with extrapolating possible futures. Scientific and technological advances abound in the genre, humanity evolves into a space-faring culture more often than not, and even human consciousness itself frequently mutates to a higher level, but when it comes to depicting future societies that work better than our own on political, economic, cultural, and spiritual levels, the extrapolative imagination of modern science fiction writers seems to flag.

Since World War II, there have really been only a handful of more or less overtly utopian science fiction novels published. Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* and *Always Coming Home*. Samuel R. Delany's *Triton*. My own *A World Between*. Theodore Sturgeon's *Venus Plus X*. Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle's *Oath of Fealty*. Bruce Sterling's *Schizmatrix*. Robert A. Heinlein's *The Moon Is a Harsh Mistress*. And not all that much else.

And, considering the tens of thousands of short science fiction stories that have been published during the same period, there really hasn't been all that much in the short form either.

But why?

Science fiction certainly doesn't shy away from depicting technologically advanced societies, nor is the attitude toward technological progress generally negative. The



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citizens of these future worlds are shown to be more psychologically evolved than ourselves about as often as they are shown to have psychically degenerated. So why does this combination of technological progress and psychic evolution so seldom produce utopian results?

It's particularly odd because more modern science fiction than not takes a quite positive attitude toward the human benefits of scientific and technological progress. Nor is SF's attitude toward the evolution of the species itself generally darkened by adherence to the doctrine of Original Sin.

It would seem that the paucity of utopian literature in the contemporary genre owes little to philosophical pessimism or theological restraints. Generally speaking, it's upward and onward in everything but political, economic, and social organization.

The answer, I believe, has more to do with literary problems than with matters of political, social, economic, or theological content.

If Plato's *Republic* was not the first utopia to be written (half-assed cases could be made for the Old Testament or the Vedas, for example), it certainly is the template for what followed.

Plato set out to expound his concept of the perfect society ruled by enlightened Philosopher Kings (such as himself), down to legal system, city planning, the relation of the citizen to the state, and so forth, and he did it by a detailed and more or less concrete description of his perfect city.

He did it not by resorting to theocratic justifications, but in terms of logic and the principles of the social science of his day, and it is this which gives *The Republic* what claims it has to being early proto-science fiction.

But of course it wasn't science fiction at all because it wasn't *fiction*. No characters. No story. No drama. No real events. It was essentially what would be called in the pages of science fiction magazines a couple of millennia later the "non-fact article" or "science-faction" or "science non-fiction."

The Greeks of Plato's day certainly had produced plenty of fiction, though most of it was theatrical, and they had a well-developed theoretical basis for its production, too. Thus Plato *could* have chosen a fictional form for elucidating his utopia and thereby invented science fiction, but he was neither a fiction writer nor a playwright, so he didn't.

Nevertheless, *The Republic was* the model for what was to evolve over the centuries, via Thomas More's *Utopia*, Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis*, and so forth, into the utopian novels of the nineteenth century like Samuel Butler's *Erewhon* and Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward*, and therein lies the literary problem that has plagued this genre ever since, down through Gernsback's scientifiction and into the present day.

Namely that the "utopian novel"



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did not evolve out of fiction at all but out of philosophical, which is to say didactic, non-fiction.

The central utopian impulse is to present and elucidate the writer's vision of a more or less perfected society in which conflict between the individual and the body politic, between the physical environment and the social system, between people, even between internally conflicting moral imperatives, is *minimized*, indeed in a perfected utopian state even *eliminated*.

Before the rise of the novel as a coherent literary form, utopias tended to be presented as more or less straightforward didactic tracts, à la Plato. But with the rise of the novel in the nineteenth century, utopian writers began to use primitive novelistic techniques to present more concrete and vivid visions of their Good Societies and to reach larger and broader readerships.

The most common literary strategy was to take a contemporary current Everyman viewpoint character, drop him into utopia, and walk him through the landscape, elucidating the system in the process, frequently in the company of a citizen thereof to serve as the writer's mouthpiece. This literarily crude technique persisted into the present day, down through *Ralph 124C1 +* and its technocratic clones, into B.F. Skinner's *Walden II*.

While sugar-coating a utopian tract with a thin layer of novelistic apparatus may be commercially and even propagandistically sound in terms of persuading a larger audience to read the thing, it hardly makes for satisfying fiction on a literary level.

How can it?

A dramatically sound story depends upon involving the reader with interesting characters working their way through some sort of conflict situation—with the environment, with other characters, with their own internal moral ambiguities—toward a thematically satisfying resolution.

That is the central problem of the utopian novel, and it is primarily a literary one. It is not that science fiction writers lack the visionary imagination to create utopian societies but that the utopian impulse that goes all the way back to Plato is at variance with the literary underpinnings of dramatic fiction that are at least as old as Aristotle.

Which is not to say that writing a literarily successful utopian novel is impossible, only that it is damnably difficult. And that the Gernsbackian solution of simply walking a reader-identification viewpoint figure through the wonders of utopia is not the way to go. In that direction lies the stupefying boredom of *Ralph 124C1 +*, *Walden II*, Le Guin's *Always Coming Home*, and a host of even more mercifully forgettable earnest tomes. The literary failure of these books as novels has led to the generally accepted notion that a utopian society, by its very nature, must be dull, static, anti-evolutionary, anti-individual-



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istic, and therefore, ultimately, and paradoxically, anti-utopian.

But this is not really so, despite the five-foot shelf of anti-utopian science fiction novels proceeding from this philosophical premise.

Take, for example, Ursula K. Le Guin's *other* utopian SF novel, *The Dispossessed*. It is probably the most well-known and critically well-regarded utopian novel of the second half of the twentieth century, which, despite one significant flaw, succeeds literarily and philosophically where *Always Coming Home* fails.

*Always Coming Home* fails philosophically and politically because the utopia presented is precisely the sort of dull, static, anti-evolutionary, anti-progressive society mercilessly skewered in the aforementioned five-foot shelf of anti-utopian science fiction novels—utopia as a perfected end-product, in which change, evolution, and progress can only be seen as degeneration.

*The Dispossessed* succeeds philosophically and politically because the utopia presented is an anarchist utopia of process rather than product, a society whose utopian aspect lies in its political system rather than in a supposedly perfected culture.

*Always Coming Home* fails literarily because what little story there is consists of walking a viewpoint character through utopia, then walking her through a straw-man dystopia, and then allowing the White Hats to win a rather silly victory through a literal deus ex machina.

*The Dispossessed*, though it too opposes its utopia with an unconvincing straw-man dystopia, succeeds literarily because its protagonist, Shevik, is not quite at home in either society, and because, in the end, he acts as a catalyst for change *within* Le Guin's utopia.

Interestingly enough, Le Guin herself called the novel "an ambiguous utopia," pointing to the fact that what sinks so many utopian novels under the leaden weight of didacticism is precisely a lack of moral ambiguity, philosophical and political multiplexity, that leads not only to the unconvincingly schematic depiction of supposed perfection, but to a characteristic failure to create either real living and breathing characters or a dramatically involving story line.

Samuel R. Delany, in homage, and perhaps literary response, to *The Dispossessed*, tagged *Triton* "an ambivalent heterotopia." Here Delany creates a society on the moon Triton that, while utopian in comparison to what he shows us elsewhere, has plenty of its own quirks, tics, and psychological peculiarities. In more or less standard manner, he walks an outside viewpoint character through it. By showing him/her attempting to adapt, and ultimately failing, at least psychcologically, Delany is able to deliver an emotionally rounded and satisfying story in the process of multiplex contemplation



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of the interface between consensual social reality and the individual psyche.

Theodore Sturgeon does much the same thing in his sexual utopia, *Venus Plus X*. He shows us a society of true human hermaphrodites, making an interesting case for the proposition that much social and political evil is the result of human sexual dimorphism. In the end, though, he reaches the conventional anti-utopian conclusion that a utopian society, however seductively presented, is ultimately an evolutionary dead-end precisely because it eliminates the conflict and dissatisfaction that is the engine of the evolutionary progress.

In *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand*, Delany uses most of a long novel to build up a very strange yet ultimately attractive culture blending the human and the extremely alien, and then deconstructs it at the end by suddenly confronting the reader with another and intellectually equally credible viewpoint which sees the whole thing as disgustingly perverted, leaving the reader with much food for thought.

In general, then, one broad strategy for writing a successful utopian science fiction novel is to create what Le Guin calls an "ambiguous utopia," a society superior to our own, but not without its own characteristic flaws and imperfections. And to view that society with an ambivalent eye too, as Delany does. If you then create a viewpoint character standing somewhat outside for one reason or another and struggling to escape from utopia, adapt to utopia, or change utopia, you have the possibility of a utopian novel that can succeed on a literary, characterological, and dramatic level, that can even become a true tragedy.

Another broad strategy is to put your utopia under outside evolutionary pressure. I did this in *A World Between*. The planet Pacifica is a utopia of process, that is, its major utopian aspect is its political system, a highly adaptable form of electronic democracy. I was then able to elucidate the virtues of this system by subjecting it to political attack from outside and showing it in the process of reacting. The drama arises out of viewpoint characters who are Pacifican politicians groping with the inherent moral and personal dilemmas arising out of a situation in which a democratic society must fight assault by non-democratic forces without resorting to non-democratic means itself.

Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle do something somewhat similar in *Oath of Fealty*. But here, their utopia, a giant condo-complex cum-mall-world called Todos Santos, is a closed society in many senses of the term, arising in the midst of a degenerate and socially decayed future Los Angeles. The political, moral, and personal conflict that generates the drama is the question of utopia for *whom*, and at what cost to the surrounding cultural matrix.



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But by far the most common strategy, successful or not, for attempting the literarily successful utopia is to tell the story of its birth. Obviously, the struggle into existence of a utopian society offers many more opportunities for dramatically gripping fiction than any tale which tries to set same in some full-evolved Good Society, perfected or not.

And as often as not, such tales are set in a post-apocalyptic world reduced by the Bomb or the Plague or an Asteroid Strike to a behavioral sink, in which the scattered survivors must emerge from the ruins, band together against barbarism, and create the New Jerusalem.

Paradoxically, it is this utopian literary impulse, rather than some cultural death-wish, that has led to so much atomic destruction in the pages of science fiction novels. The nuclear holocaust is, after all, a very convenient literary device indeed. It can be invoked to blow away as little or as much of the present world as your literary intent requires, leaving you whatever set-up you may need in which to create a new society closer to the heart's desire.

Take Orson Scott Card's *The Folk of the Fringe*, for example. This is not exactly a novel, and not exactly not a novel either. It's a series of interconnected novellas with some common characters. All but one of these stories were previously published in magazines, which is an old and valid SF form less often employed these days than it used to be.

It is science fiction, but it is also forthrightly intended as Mormon fiction, as the afterward by Michael Collings makes explicitly clear. What Card seems to be after here is the depiction of at least the beginnings of a new Good Society, if not explicitly or theocratically Mormon, then informed by Mormon virtues, arising out of the ruins of the old.

While much has been made of the author's Mormonism, not the least by the author himself in his own afterword to this book and elsewhere, and while this may have been looked askance at in certain quarters, it seems to me that this is quite a legitimate literary endeavor and certainly a utopian one. Why not? There is definitely something to be said for creating a utopia to exemplify your own most deeply held beliefs, and all the more so when such intent is spelled out as clearly as Card does here.

Card invokes the nuclear holocaust, but it is a rather peculiar one, specifically tailored, against a certain amount of scientific probability, to suit his peculiar literary needs. Enough bombs have gone off to shatter American society, but not to really devastate the biosphere, enough to render most cities uninhabitable, but not to depopulate the countryside. The climate has shifted enough to eventually drown Salt Lake City and the Mormon Tabernacle and to create new desert that needs to be con-



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verted into farmland, but not enough to make the land seem terminally ruined.

Essentially what Card has done is use this device to recreate something like the situation Mormons faced in the nineteenth century. An essentially agrarian society, with scattered groups of Mormons fleeing westward from persecution across the treacherous wastes towards the New Jerusalem in Utah.

With differences, of course. For now the New Jerusalem already exists out there somewhere, standing as a beacon and a promise of civilization (at least to Mormons), though the submergence of the Tabernacle would seem to indicate at least a partial fall from grace from which even Card's latter day Latter Day Saints need be redeemed.

Then too, as in *Red Prophet*, Card equates the coming of the Europeans with the spiritual death of the American continent, and the renaissance of the Indian as its spiritual redemption. Indeed, in the final novella, "America," the new Mormon civilization more or less voluntarily submits itself to Indian rule, perhaps as an act of spiritual expiation for the spiritual sins of the European usurper and a return to the lost spiritual grace symbolized by the drowning of the Tabernacle.

Admittedly this is a somewhat chancy interpretation, my Mormon theology being sketchy as it is, but one need not be easily conversant with *The Book of Mormon* to see that *The Folk of the Fringe* extols certain virtues not usually common to the genre of post-holocaust utopian science fiction, or indeed to science fiction in general.

Whereas most such science fiction extols a sort of libertarian, ruggedly individualistic, survivalistic, anti-collectivistic ethos as the basis of the new good society, Card comes down foursquarely on the side of communalism.

Whereas the heroes of most such stuff are loners, rebels, and outsiders struggling to preserve their own personal liberty and perhaps that of others, Card's heroes here struggle toward a sense of belonging—to a family, to a small group, to a religious belief, ultimately, perhaps, to a sense of civilization itself, which, chez Card, arises out of just such large and small willing subsumations of the individual to the communal good.

Except in the final novella, where mystical geopolitics become central, Card demonstrates this by small-group dynamics, showing an orphan boy seeking entry to a family, a wandering loner ultimately converting to the Mormon faith, a man slowly becoming a member of the peripatetic community of a traveling show.

Whether one accepts this on a philosophical level or not is a matter of personal belief, but Card makes a credible case for his concept of the Good Society as one arising out of the willing subsumation of a certain amount of individual liberty to the common good. A case,



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after all, which could be totally denied only by the most rabid and doctrinaire libertarian, since the converse would obviously be an egoistic anarchy of all against all.

Interestingly enough, Card's title, *The Folk of the Fringe*, points directly to the fact that he has chosen to depict his utopian society rather obliquely, from the multiplex viewpoints of characters on the outside looking in, at least psychologically. These are identification figures, who, like the non-Mormon reader, spend the bulk of their stories resisting, coming to terms with, and then perhaps finally accepting the author's vision of the Good Society as the product of the surrender of egoistic individualism to the Commonwealth of the whole.

This does several things. On a literary level, it focuses the various stories squarely on precisely the sort of internal conflict the typical science fiction reader (indeed the typical American reader) is likely to feel upon confrontation with Card's thesis. On a science fictional level, it allows the author to avoid the necessity of depicting his utopian society in deadening and perhaps confrontational detail. Which is to say, that on an ideological level, it frames the proposition in terms of the individual's acceptance of the supremacy of communal values, rather than on the cultural specifics of those values.

Whether Card's common good is *your* common good is another matter, upon which *The Folk of the Fringe* succeeds or fails as utopian vision in your eyes. But the fact that Card is honest enough to show us some of the pain, unhappiness, and frustrations arising out of the subsumation of the individual psyche to the common communal good allows the book to succeed on a literary level, whether one can swallow its specifics as utopian political philosophy or not.

In *Earth*, on the other hand, David Brin takes the bull by both horns and the tail. Here again, the title points forthrightly to the author's scale and angle of attack, though of an entirely different sort, for one would hardly dare to nominate the planet itself as the title character without attempting to deliver a grand geopolitical and even metaphysical vision of its destiny.

And indeed Brin does. The novel is suitably enormous, and Brin also appends an afterword in which he lays out his philosophical, ecological, political, sociological, and even metaphysical theses after the fact.

Furthermore, Earth is indeed the central character, and in ways it will be exceedingly difficult to fully discuss without committing the critic's cardinal sin of preempting the author's esthetic effect by giving away too much of the ending.

Brin opens the novel with a section called "Planet," in which, in a single page, he presents its evolution from the birth of its sun to the rise of life in its primal seas before going on to introduce human



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characters. And he concludes with another single page section, also called "Planet," from the point of view of a transformed Earth, aka Gaia, a planetary consciousness newborn into the cosmic vastness.

In between. . . .

An artificial black hole, created by Dr. Alex Lustig, is released from its electromagnetic confinement when an eco-mob cuts the power to the lab, and sinks into the Earth, sucking matter into it, and apparently threatening the existence of the planet. Upon investigation of this catastrophe, Lustig and geophysicist George Hutton discover to their befuddlement and horror that there is already *another* black hole in the Earth's core wreaking even greater havoc, and together the two of them seem to spell certain planetary destruction. Where did the second hole come from? Can the Earth be saved?

If this MacGuffin seems rather familiar, well, it is. Greg Bear used somewhat different physics to set up the same situation in *The Forge of God*, where a machine civilization out to destroy protoplasmic life drops two "bullets," one neutronium, the other anti-neutronium, into the Earth's core in order to bring about planetary destruction. And indeed, toward the end of *Earth* the finger seems to point toward just such a malevolent extraterrestrial agency.

Gregory Benford once told me that he assisted Bear with the physics of his planetary destruction mechanism, the same Benford who collaborated with Brin on *The Heart of the Comet*, and for all I know the three of them have discussed these matters ensemble.

There are other similarities between *The Forge of God* and *Earth*, too. Both books are widescreen multiviewpoint epics. The stories of both books revolve around efforts to understand what has happened and save the planet.

But the superficial similarities are deceiving.

*The Forge of God* is set in the immediate future, and the novel is a tragic and elegiac meditation on what is in the process of being lost, in which the Earth is indeed destroyed, though Bear does not quite allow the human species to be extinguished with it.

*Earth*, however, is something else again, almost as if Brin set out to take the same MacGuffin' and turn it inside out and upside down.

For one thing, Brin sets his novel about a half century into the future. This enables him to paint a wide-canvas picture of a future Earth that manages to be both utopia and dystopia. Though it first appears that runaway science is the villain of the piece, this soon enough turns out not to be the case, as Lustig, Hutton, and other technological types struggle to save the planet via technology.

And while the Earth is indeed threatened by ecological disaster created by the previous century's technological stupidity (or, more fairly, naïveté), a more mature technological culture is shown in



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the process of attempting to repair the damage, and not without some success. The planet-wide computer and communication Net is presented in a positive light and in the end as an instrument of salvation. The transformation of humanity into a space-going species is also seen as an evolutionary good. And the major villain of the story is an eco-fanatic. On the other hand, Hutton, the geophysicist, and a sympathetic figure, is a Maori mystic.

What Brin seems to be about here is the presentation of an Earth in the process of evolving from our present dystopian mess taken a bit further into something of a utopia based on achieving a harmonious balance between ecosphere and technosphere, protoplasm and metal, science and mysticism, with the outcome still in doubt.

On the whole, it is a well-realized, believable, and balanced portrait. Brin's trouble as the novelist arises from the ideological didacticism that creeps in as the layers of the MacGuffin are stepwise revealed and the plot proceeds toward a deus ex machina ending, and my problem as a critic arises from the paradox of having to discuss this without destroying the narrative tension of a novel that is, on balance, well worth reading.

Suffice it to say, perhaps, that the extraterrestrial agency behind the second black hole has transcendental rather than malevolent purposes in mind, at least from a certain viewpoint. And that salvation involves the merger of technosphere and ecosphere in a manner that takes the well-known Gaia hypothesis to a new level of literary literal-mindedness.

Or, to resort to somewhat desperate coyness . . .

There is an old Frederic Brown short-short in which a computer is constructed that is able to access all other computers and data-banks in the galaxy. Upon completion, it is turned on and asked the obvious ultimate question: "Is there a God?"

"Now there is," says the Voice from the Electronic Whirlwind.

Substitute Big Mommy for God and you will get as much of the idea as I can bring myself to reveal. Enough, perhaps, to allow me to voice my disquiet with *Earth*'s denouement.

In the end, Brin's novel does reach a utopian conclusion, not only physically, but in a sense morally. But, after a long novel informed by the struggles of good people attempting to save the planet and right certain wrongs, it does so via the supersession of humanity's moral responsibility and stewardship of its planet's destiny by the creation of an all-powerful Planetary Nanny to keep us on the straight and narrow.

Perhaps this is indeed only my phallocratic adolescent distaste for maternal authority speaking, and perhaps David Brin is ultimately right, and we poor shaved apes would be better off under the watchful eye of eternal parental constraint. One man's utopia is an-



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other man's nightmare, and this is fruitful ground for endless intellectual and moral disputation.

But on a literary level, it just doesn't work, for the same reason that all deus ex machina endings fail to satisfy, emotionally, philosophically, or structurally. In *Earth*, Brin has done an admirable job, for the most part, in depicting our world on an evolutionary cusp via characters whose lives are deeply engaged in the thematic issues. To resolve such a story by removing the resolution thereof from the hands of these characters is to beg the issues involved and reveal far too nakedly the author's didactic intent, a failing all too characteristic of utopian novels.

*Earth* is a noble effort, well-realized, for the most part, and certainly Brin's most mature and interesting work, and if it is not entirely successful, it is not for lack of scope and ambition.

Kim Stanley Robinson's *Pacific Edge*, on the other hand, is a utopian novel that succeeds entirely, and by the most unexpected literary strategy for such a work, the *limitation* of scope, and, seemingly, of ambition.

When Robinson published *The Gold Coast*, it was revealed as the second volume of a so-called "Orange County Trilogy," of which *The Wild Shore* was retrospectively revealed as having been the first. A very strange trilogy indeed, in which successive volumes, rather than being sequential sequels, present alternate futures using the same timeframe, the same locale, and alternate versions of many of the same characters, at least in terms of name and physical description.

*The Wild Shore* is set in an Orange County future in which America, having been humbled by a terrorist brand of nuclear destruction, is cordoned off by the rest of the world for its previous imperialist sins and turned into a kind of agrarian reservation. A fine novel, but a rather sad and claustrophobic one, a meditation upon well-earned diminishment and a sense of loss.

*The Gold Coast* presents a very different Orange County future, in which American imperialism has continued, and most of the lovingly described landscape which once made Orange County the "American Mediterranean" has been overgrown by "condomondo" tickytack and the military-industrial complex which forms the basis of its economy. Here Robinson draws a powerful equation between dope-dealing and the armaments industry, in which the cynical mavens of the military-industrial complex come off very much morally second-best to righteous and idealistic drug dealers. It throws *The Wild Shore* into a whole new light by suggesting that the American comeuppance depicted therein might be well-earned, that a restricted agrarian future for Orange County and America might be preferable to the supersuburban dys-



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topia of the military-industrial alternative.

For my money, *The Gold Coast* was one of the best science fiction novels of the late 1980s, and so I could only groan with trepidation when Robinson announced that the third and final volume in the Orange County Trilogy was going to be a utopia.

How could Robinson top *The Gold Coast*, or at least follow it with a utopian conclusion that would be something other than a letdown? Yes indeed, what was called to mind by this pronouncement was all the literary pitfalls of the utopian novel detailed earlier in this essay. Particularly since Robinson had set himself the task of writing a utopia that would be a fitting conclusion to a major megawork in progress, the first two volumes of which were a kind of ambiguous tragedy and a heartfelt political novel of passionate conviction and characterological complexity.

Lotsa luck, Stan!

So it was with a certain sense of skepticism that I began reading *Pacific Edge*. This was not exactly diminished when it became apparent that Robinson's third version of Orange County's future was an Ecotopia. Reforestation. Replacement of cars by bicycles for the most part, freeways and streets by bike-paths. Limitations on growth, industrial activity, the size of corporations. Redesign and reconstruction of houses to bring the outdoors inside. Endless slow-pitch softball games as a major center of cultural life. Government by small-scale town council meetings.

Oh shit. A pleasant enough if rather static little low-key community, might even be a nice place to live, if you're into frisbees and gardening, but as a venue for dramatic story-telling to match the tragic set-up of *The Wild Shore* or the superheated craziness of *The Gold Coast*, what a bore, akin, somehow, to the retrogressive, anti-evolutionary wet ecotopia of Le Guin's aforementioned *Always Coming Home*.

Unless, of course, Robinson was setting the whole thing up to knock it down, unless this was going to be a deconstruction of a fairly bland and rather standard ecotopia. . . .

No, that's not what *Pacific Edge* is all about. Instead, Robinson has done something quite unexpected, something perhaps unique in all the literature. He has written a utopian novel that is not *about* his utopia at all, and thereby opened up whole new possibilities for the form. And, paradoxically, managed to say something quite new about utopia itself in the process.

No doubt Kim Stanley Robinson sincerely believes in this utopian vision and indeed he has created a detailed picture of a well-functioning society in which it would be quite pleasant for people to live. "May you be condemned to live in interesting times," goes the old Chinese curse, and, conversely, this alternative Orange County future being much less "interesting" in



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that sense than those of *The Wild Shore* or *The Gold Coast*, life therein is indeed good. In *Pacific Edge*, Robinson paints an attractive picture of a kind of unexceptionable consensus ecotopia, and precisely because it *is* so unexceptionable, it is quite believable as a venue for the Good Life.

But of course, for that very reason, it should make for a dull novel.

It doesn't.

For instead of constructing a story designed to extol his vision of ecotopia, Robinson uses his utopia as the setting for a novel of character, for a love story of sorts, for a story of deep emotional conflict *within* utopia. And political conflict as well.

And *without* deconstructing the utopian set-up either.

Kevin Claiborne, the main protagonist, a carpenter and interior designer, has long pined for Ramona Sanchez, wife of the mayor, Alfredo Blair. To make matters more piquant, they are, respectively, third baseman and shortstop on the same softball team, and Alfredo is the pitcher for a rival team.

Ramona and Alfredo break up over internal marital problems, in the heat of which Kevin and Ramona begin an affair, the first true requited love of Kevin's life. Kevin's communal housemate, Doris, meanwhile, has long had a secret pining for *him*.

Long about this time, Mayor Blair seeks to have Rattlesnake Hill rezoned for industrial development, a development which will enhance the business of a company of which he is a director. Rattlesnake Hill is a little piece of wilderness close by Kevin's communal house that has always been his special place. It is a special place associated with his revered grandfather Tom, who, after the death of his wife, has retired from the world to become a crabby old hermit.

There is more—Oscar Baldarramma, a lawyer from outside who serves as a somewhat detached observer; Kevin's mystical friend Hank; a frame story written by someone who will later turn out to be connected to the main line; Nadezhda, a Russian visitor who becomes Tom's lover and brings him back to the center of events—but essentially what *Pacific Edge* is all about is a love quadrangle and a zoning battle.

And it's quite enough, as the principals all take part in the political conflict over Rattlesnake Hill, while the love stories play themselves out to anything but the expected pat conclusions.

Along the way, there is much about the natural landscape, bicycling, some delicious stuff about atavistic twentieth century macho sports of which Oscar is an aficionado, high-tech sailing, and slow-pitch softball, which Robinson uses masterfully to illumine theme and relationship.

(Though come on, Stan, given soft pitch, I can just about swallow an all-season consecutive game



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hitting streak, but a 1.000 batting average until the very last at-bat?)

What Kim Stanley Robinson has done is shown us the conflicts that must go on even among good people living in a well-functioning utopia. Even in utopia, people will fall in love with people who are not in love with them, or fall out of love with people who are, or lose their loves in one way or another. Even in utopia, a hitting streak can come to an end via a circus-catch by your best friend. Even in utopia, loved ones die.

Even in utopia there will be legitimate conflicts of interest between decent idealistic people, conflicts that can even cause them to hate each other.

Utopia does not consist of the elimination of such conflicts. When we read fiction that tries to convince us that it does, the story bores, and the utopian vision rings hollow, for we know in our hearts that life is not like that, and never can be.

Utopia, or at least the Good Society that approaches it, consists of a way of life, a social and political matrix, within which these inevitable personal and idealistic conflicts can play themselves out without permanently damaging the community as a whole, a community within which these human dramas, tragedies, love stories, can take place, on the other hand, without undue suppression in the name of the common good.

That is why Kim Stanley Robinson's utopia, familiar and unexceptional in science fictional terms though it may be, rings true where so many more outré and original utopian conceptions seem dead and schematic. For that is not mere speculative cleverness, that is wisdom.

*La vie continue.* Life goes on.

Even in Utopia, better believe it. ●

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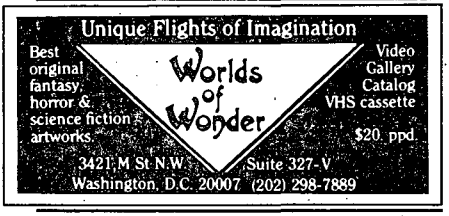
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# SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

The May rush, then the exam-time lull. The Memorial Day cons have been late with their plans. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, and a sample of SF folksongs, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at Box 3343, Fairfax VA 22038. The hot line is (703) 2SF-DAYS. If a machine answers (with a list of the weekend's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, enclose an SASE (say what it's for). For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months ahead. Look for me at cons as Filthy Pierre.

## MAY 1991

3-5—**ConTraption.** For info, write: **Box 2285, Ann Arbor MI 48106.** Or call **(313) 542-0526.** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). Con will be held in: Troy MI (if city omitted, same as in address). Guests include: Frederik Pohl, and long-time Ohio convention organizers Liz Gross and Bob Hillis.

3-5—**Corflu. (915) 542-0443.** Embassy Suites, El Paso TX. Annual do for traditional fanzine fans.

3-5—**RocKon. (501) 370-0889.** Holiday Inn Otter Creek, Little Rock AR. Lackey, B. Christ, J. King.

3-5—**LepreCon. (602) 968-7833.** Safari Hotel, Scottsdale AZ. C. N. Douglas, Snodgrass, Rowena M.

3-6—**MexiCon.** Cairn Hotel, Harrogate UK. The return of the sporadic British relaxacon. No guests.

10-12—**MisCon. (406) 721-7999.** Best Western, Missoula MT. Barbara Hambly, William J. Warren.

13-15—**AlasCon. (907) 694-3313.** Egan Convention Center, Anchorage AK. Benford. Academic con.

17-19—**KeyCon, Box 3178, Winnipeg MB R3C 4E6.** Gordon R. Dickson, Adrian Kleinbergen, R. Gillies.

17-19—**Oasis, Box 616469, Orlando FL 32861. (407) 788-3014, 725-2383.** R. Asprin, the Passovoys.

24-27—**Disclave, 1200 Waynewood Blvd., Alexandria VA 22308.** Likely at the Greenbelt MD Sheraton.

## JUNE 1991

7-9—**ConText, 10523 100th Ave., Edmonton AB T5J 0A8. (403) 424-7764.** Robinsons, Freas, W. Gibson.

7-9—**DeepSouthCon, Box 23592, Knoxville TN 37933. (615) 579-3202.** C. L. Grant, Offutt, M. Lackey.

21-23—**Ozmopolitan, Box 95, Kinderhook IL 62345.** Big meet of fans of L. Frank Baum's "Oz" books.

21-23—**4th St. Fantasy Con, 4242 Minnehaha Ave. S., Minneapolis MN 55406.** D. W. Jones, Doherty.

21-23—**Protoplasm, 1 Shoesmith Ct., Merchant's Place, Reading Berks. RG1 1GT, UK.** Expecting 500.

28-30—**MidWestCon, 6828 Alpine Ave. #4, Cincinnati OH 45236. (513) 984-1447, 631-2543.** Relaxacon.

## AUGUST 1991

29-Sep. 2—**ChiCon V, Box A3120, Chicago IL 60690.** WorldCon. Clement, Powers. $125 to 7/15/91.

## SEPTEMBER 1992

3-7—**MagiCon, Box 621992, Orlando FL 32862. (407) 859-8421.** The '92 World SF Con. $75 to 3/31/91.

## SEPTEMBER 1993

2-6—**ConFrancisco, Box 22097, San Francisco CA 94122. (916) 331-2491.** WorldCon 1993. $70 to 9/30/91.

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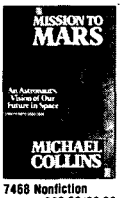


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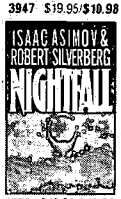


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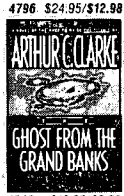


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